

FROM THE EDITORS OF ROD SERLING'S THE TWILIGHT ZONE MAGAZINE

NIGHT CRY™

SPRING 1986

K48477

\$2.95

Fiendish children haunt
the streets of Paris in

ROBERT BLOCH'S

new novelette
THE YUGOSLAVES

John Skipp
& Craig Spector:

THE LIGHT AT THE END

Tales of
Stark Raving
Terror from:

BRAM STOKER

J. N. WILLIAMSON

DAVID J. SCHOW

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

STEVEN POPKES

Display until Mar. 3





NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 1, No. 5
Spring 1986

ALAN RODGERS 6 *Introduction*

STORIES

ANITA KRANITZ SCHLANK	12	<i>Special Delivery</i>
STEVEN POPKES	20	<i>Hellcatcher</i>
THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)	51	<i>Coming of Age at Apple Creek</i>
JOHN SKIPP	60	<i>The Light</i>
AND CRAIG SPECTOR		<i>at the End</i>
BRAM STOKER	80	<i>The Squaw</i>
V. K. GIBSON	93	<i>American Dream</i>
DARRELL SCHWEITZER	128	<i>Leaving</i>
PAUL WITCOVER	139	<i>Mayaland</i>
A. R. MORLAN	150	<i>The Holiday House</i>
JULIE YOBST	163	<i>Still-Life</i>
FRANK MEYER	170	<i>The Promise</i>

NOVELETTES

ROBERT BLOCH	30	<i>The Yougoslaves</i>
J. N. WILLIAMSON	173	<i>The Book of Webster's</i>

SERIAL

DAVID J. SCHOW	101	<i>Brass, Part I of II</i>
----------------	-----	----------------------------

POETRY

RONALD TERRY	161	<i>Three Poems: The Shaman</i>
--------------	-----	--------------------------------

NONFICTION

THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)	72	<i>Profile: Bram Stoker</i>
------------------------------------	----	---------------------------------

Night Cry, Spring, 1986, Volume 1, Number 5, is published quarterly (4 times per year) in the United States and simultaneously in Canada by TZ Publications, a division of Montcalm Publishing Corporation, 800 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Telephone (212) 986-9600. Copyright © 1985 by TZ Publications. *Night Cry* is published pursuant to a license from Carolyn Serling and Viacom Enterprises, a division of Viacom International, Inc. All rights reserved. Return postage must accompany all unsolicited material. The publisher assumes no responsibility for care and return of unsolicited materials. All rights reserved on material accepted for publication unless otherwise specified. All letters sent to *Night Cry* or to its editors are assumed intended for publication. Nothing may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publishers. Any similarity between persons appearing in fiction and real persons living or dead is coincidental. Single copies \$2.95 in U.S., \$3.50 in Canada. Printed in U.S.A.

EDITORIAL

ALAN RODGERS: Editor
ROBIN BROMLEY: Managing Editor

ART

MICHAEL MONTE: Design Director
MAY SUGANO-KOTO: Art Director
MICHAEL MARKHAM: Art Production

PRODUCTION

STEPHEN J. FALLON: Director
RUSSELL T. ORENSTEIN: Coordinator
IRMA LANDAZURI: Typography
FRANK FEDORNOCK: Typography

ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE

CHRIS GROSSMAN: Controller
ASNAR ANGELES: Accounting Assistant
SAUL STEINHAUS: Accounting Assistant
MARGARET INZANA: Assistant to the Publisher
ANNE CANNON: Office Assistant
NICOLE BAKER: Office Assistant
ALLAN GEWAT: Traffic
STEVEN MOORE: Traffic

ADVERTISING/MARKETING

JEFF GRINSPAN: National Sales Director
MARINA DESPOTAKIS: Coordinator and Direct Mail Manager
SHARON KENNEY: Advertising Sales Manager
KAREN MARTORANO: Assistant

CIRCULATION/PROMOTION

MICHAEL DILLON: Newsstand Sales Director
ANNMARIE PISTILLI: Subscription Manager
Circulation Managers:
BRIAN ORENSTEIN: Eastern
BRUCE ANTONANGELI: Midwestern
HAROLD BRIDGE III: Southern
SAM FRODE-HANSEN: Western
JUDY LINDEN: Direct Sales Manager
LAURA LO MEDICO: Promotion Coordinator
NANCY WOLZ: Assistant

S. EDWARD ORENSTEIN
Chairman and Executive Publisher

MILTON J. CUEVAS
President and Publisher

SIDNEY Z. GELLMAN
Treasurer

CAROL SERLING
Associate Publisher and Consulting Editor

JOHN R. BENSINK
Executive Editor

MICHAEL BLAINE
Editorial Director

Cover for
The Light at the End
and all interior art
by J.K. Potter

Material from *The Light at the End* by John Skipp and Craig Spector is copyrighted ©1986 by John Skipp and Craig Spector and is reprinted by permission of Bantam Books, Inc. All rights reserved.

"The Squaw" by Bram Stoker and "Still-Life" by Julie Yobst are reprinted from other sources.

The following are new and appear in this issue of *Night Cry* for the first time anywhere: "Special Delivery" by Anita Kranitz Schlank, "Hellcatcher" by Steven Popkes, "Coming of Age at Apple Creek" by Thomas E. Sanders (Nippawanock), "The Light at the End" by John Skipp and Craig Spector, "American Dream" by V.K. Gibson, "Leaving" by Darrell Schweitzer, "Mayaland" by Paul Witcover, "The Holiday House" by A.R. Morjan, "The Promise" Frank Meyer, "The Yougoslaves" by Robert Bloch, "The Book of Webster's" by J.N. Williamson, Part I of "Brass" David J. Schow, "Three Poems: The Shaman" by Ronald Terry, and "Profile: Bram Stoker" by Thomas E. Sanders (Nippawanock).

WELCOME TO THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

When the phone rings at *Night Cry*
sometimes it's wisest not to answer.

Someone called me the other day—I can't say I remember who it was very clearly, but that happens when you get a lot of calls from people you don't know—and in the course of the conversation he asked me what it was that made a story frightening.

Well! There's a question for you. I think I'd rather try to jump over the moon, or drive faster than the speed of light, or even define science fiction than say what makes a story frightening. All sorts of things frighten me, in fiction and in life (strangely enough, not always the same things) and if there's some great common denominator that ties them all together, I can't imagine what it is.

I did the sensible thing: I made up something to tell the fellow in a hurry (whatever I said it was so ephemeral that I can't even remember it now) and went on about my business.

But the question came back to haunt me. Questions do that sometimes; itch and needle at the back of my brain until finally I find some answer for them. I still don't have an answer to this one. But I do have a thought or two that bears consideration:

When my wife and I first came to New York two and half years ago, we were really hungry. Amy got a job first as a secretary; I managed to get work proofreading junk mail a month later. The money Amy made wasn't enough to live on, really, but enough to starve on gracefully. What I got from junk mail wasn't even that much, but being careful and inventive—I know a lot of good recipes for beans and rice, and you can live badly on those for almost nothing—we did all right.

But then spring came—it was January when we got here—and Amy got her big break: the opportunity to work for a mystery magazine, part time, as a proofreader and assistant.

But even if it was a big break, it meant going from being hungry to being dirt poor. Amy's income was cut in half.

Later, on an afternoon in July, Bob Carey and I—I worked with Bob at the junk mail house—were walking along the broad, filthy sidewalk that runs outside the front of Grand Central Station. We'd just eaten at a pizza counter run by Iranians over on Lexington. The two dollars and fifty cents I spent on a slice of pizza and a watery Coke that afternoon was half of all the money we could spend that week and still pay the rent and everything else. We were going to walk across town on some errand or other, tangled up in conversation—I was trying to defend some outrageous proposition, and I was wrong, and I knew it, which only made my argument more determined—and I wasn't watching where I was going. Bob must not have been paying much attention, either, because he didn't warn me until it was already too late.

"Alan, look out," he said, and I looked up . . .

. . . to see the bag lady. She stooped, her back hunched. The humping of her spine looked permanent, like a deformation or the result of some horrible accident. She wore piles and piles of rags, old sweaters, a frayed, filthy-white cotton sundress, and around it all a ladies' evening jacket, beautiful once, but now covered with filth, the fur of its collar frayed and gappy like mange.

In July! In New York! And she had to be living in the New York Central tunnels underneath and behind the station, like most of the bag people around Grand Central. It was even hotter there than in the rest of the city; trains sit in those tunnels for hours, idling, bleeding waste heat off into the already-grey subterranean air. Something was *wrong* with her, probably more wrong than with most bag ladies. Nobody can live in that kind of heat, in that kind of humidity, in that kind of filth, and dress like it was the coldest part of February. Not without getting his brains stir-cooked slowly like they were scrambled eggs. Unless maybe his brains already are scrambled eggs.

I was only eight inches away from her; I'd drifted a lot closer than I ever should have before I turned. . . . I breathed in, a short gasp, really, and I smelled her. Whatever the heat and filth did to her brains and her insides, it did worse things to her skin. She

smelled like old boots and socks and underwear left in a barrel to ferment for months, and worse there was the sick-sweet smell of meat rotting, like some disease had got in under her skin and was left to fester. And all of that so powerful that the reek hit my sinuses like ammonia, like smelling salts, and burned deep into my skull.

In the instant before I jumped away, I saw her looking at me like she wanted to touch me, to reach out and hold me in her arms like I was a child she'd lost years and years ago, to caress me and stroke my hair. Her lips parted and she almost began to coo, and I saw that all her teeth were gone.

I wanted to run. To run and hide.

I hurried away and leaned over the edge of the sidewalk, and my body wanted to puke, and the smell of her was still in the back of my throat (it followed me for weeks) and I *wanted* to puke, but I didn't dare, no, because lunch had cost so much and I couldn't afford to buy it all over again. . . .

And telling you all of that is just a ruse, really—not that it isn't true—because what I really mean to tell you is this: I'll never forget her. She's been etched into my brain by her smell, and the memory doesn't let go of smells the way it drifts away from everything else. If you don't believe me, just try forgetting the way the air smells drifting in off the sea in the early evening—even those of you who've only been near the ocean once or twice in your lives. The memory does peculiar things.

The bag lady never did anything important. If this were a story (which, in some ways, it is) she'd hardly even be a character, really. I did develop her a little, but I certainly didn't do anything *worth* remembering with her. But because of a mnemonic trick she's pretty damned memorable. What makes her memorable is her smell, but what frightens me about her is her love.

Which is what I always think of when I hear people going on about memorable characters. I can certainly understand how a writer's ego would *want* his characters to be remembered. After all, most writers get involved in writing because *they* want to be known, *exactly* to be remembered. But I don't see why memorability should be so important to the reader. Maybe in certain special cases, maybe for certain particular circumstances—but it certainly isn't the be-all and the end-all that I've heard it propped up to be.

But it's character that makes stories frightening, more often than not. Maybe even always, but I don't think I can defend the

proposition that far.

But character isn't just the artifacts of writers' imaginations. Character, in the sense I understand it relating to stories, means much more nearly what it does in the sentence, "Now, *there's* a man with character," than it refers to fictional persons as artifacts. Character is a story trying to explain why and how people do what they do; even if it is a fancy-sounding word, it's the obvious thing that almost all stories are trying to do, whether the writer wants to admit it or not. Character is a process, not an artifact: writers trying to explore why people are and what they are, speculating—often in dark, unsettling ways—into our nature.

Character is the bag lady's wanting to love, her needing to caress. It's the terrible, unsettling truth, that black insight that we need to deny with all our hearts. It's the vile, murderous love of a dull man in Steven Popkes's "Hellcatcher." The delicate compassion of the fiend in Robert Bloch's "The Yougoslaves." The naiveté of the mighty in Paul Witcover's "Mayaland." It's the sophistication of the simple redneck come unhinged in J. N. Williamson's "The Book of Webster's."

It's a dangerous practice.

And the way we practice the black art of character here at *Night Cry* is dark and terrifying indeed. Our stories seep with knowledge not so much forbidden as forbidding; we speculate and delve into the deepest, most fuligin corners of the heart.

Brace yourself.

The ride has just begun.

—AR

NIGHT CRY

800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017

22 November 1985

Dear Reader,

We've heard from some of you that you're having a hard time finding *Night Cry* on your local newsstand. Because we've had so many inquiries, we're running this letter in the magazine, where we can talk to all of you at once.

The newsstand is a crowded place these days; most retailers don't really have time to keep track of every magazine on the rack, especially small, digest-sized magazines like *Night Cry*. That's where you come in. There isn't anyone around as aware of our distribution as you are—except for our dedicated regional circulation managers (Brian Orenstein in the east, Bruce Antonangeli in the midwest, Harold Bridge III in the south, and Sam Frode-Hansen in the west), and those people, dedicated as they are, can only be in so many places at one time.

You, on the other hand, are right there where the problem is. If you let the people on your end of the magazine business know that you're looking for *Night Cry*, they'll listen. Talk to the manager of your local newsstand. Talk to your local distributor—the people at the company whose delivery vans actually bring *Night Cry* to you.

Let them know that you like *Night Cry*, and that you'd like to be able to buy the next issue, too. Let them know if you had a hard time finding this issue.

Remember, *Night Cry* isn't available by subscription, so only your newsstand can bring us to you.

Thanks. We'll be waiting for you.



Alan Rodgers
Editor

Special Delivery

by ANITA KRANITZ SCHLANK

A deliciously gruesome little tale
about a man with a talent . . .
for *finding* things.

The day started much like any other, until Kronskey, bleary-eyed and slightly hung-over, emptied the last of the box of shredded wheat into his blue plastic cereal bowl. There, nestled among the miniature spoon-sized biscuits, was a pinkish cylindrical object, no more than three inches in length.

Kronskey blinked a few times, found his eyeglasses on the kitchen counter and put them on. He looked closely at the thing for several seconds before attempting to fish it from the cereal bowl with a spoon.

Upon close examination, Kronskey deduced several things. First, that it was shriveled, slightly dry to the touch, and somewhat rough-textured. Second, that it was comprised of three jointed parts, and third, that it was what he'd originally taken it to be, a finger. The little finger, to be precise, although he couldn't tell if it was from a right hand or left hand. It had a short, clipped fingernail, a small, well-cared-for cuticle, and a dark brown beauty mark on the bend of the second knuckle. All this Kronskey saw clearly and precisely just before he dropped the finger onto the kitchen table and vomited in his sink.

Finished, he rinsed out his mouth with tap water and waited before turning back around to face the table. A minute went by, then two. Kronskey heaved a sigh, shook his mostly bald head, and

smiled to himself, lifting only the right hand corner of his mouth. He'd really tied one on last night, celebrating the end of the affair. Of course, he wasn't really thrilled that Margo had dumped him, but to be honest, he never really thought it would last. Anyway, what had a twenty-two-year-old knish like that seen in his dumpy, fifty-plus-year-old body? He suspected that she'd hitched her wagon to his star when she lost her job at the dry cleaner's. Then he'd had a job, a regular income, even if being a subway guard had forced him to work odd hours. But after he'd bashed that kid holding the knife (he'd thought it was a knife at the time), the official inquiry board decided that the New York subway system could do without his services. His two weeks severance pay and Margo's walk-out had come at the same time, so he decided to combine the occasions and celebrate.

Never again, he'd never drink like that again, he promised himself. Imagine, seeing things in the cereal! Kronsky shook his head again and turned around. The finger lay on the kitchen table where he'd dropped it. He watched it for a while. The finger just lay there. He crept over to the table and poked it with the end of his cereal spoon. The finger rolled a half-turn toward Kronsky. Quickly, he jumped back a step or two, then slowly advanced again until he was standing over it. He bent down until his head was no more than three inches from it, and took a deep sniff. It smelled of shredded wheat, with an undertone of plastic.

Ah-ha, Kronsky thought, smiling sheepishly. *It's plastic, of course, a prize in a cereal box.* He retrieved the empty box from the trash and checked the front and back. Nothing there about a prize. He read the small print on the sides of the box. No special deal there. Curious, he picked up the finger again, comparing it with his own stubby digit. The nail on the cereal-box finger was shinier, thicker, and healthier looking than his. He gave it a test bite. Beneath his teeth, it felt the same as his own well-chewed nail. He tried to manipulate the joints, bending it slightly, but it seemed too brittle and he desisted. He didn't want to break it.

Kronsky turned the finger upside down. Looking at it from its base, he could see the bone inside, and what appeared to be tendons and ligaments. For a moment he was tempted to make a slight incision at the base of his own pinky for comparison, but he stopped himself. If it was a real finger, he stood a good chance of making himself a tidy sum from the shredded wheat company.

Imagine, letting a thing like that slip by quality control!

Kronsky found a paper napkin and wrapped the finger carefully. Looking around for a safe place to keep it, he finally decided on a half-empty box of oatmeal. He gently pushed the napkin-wrapped finger down into the oats, so it was concealed, in case his apartment was broken into. He drafted a letter to the shredded wheat company, informing them of his find, and suggesting that they contact him at their earliest convenience. He was going to have them contact his lawyer, in case they wanted to settle out of court immediately, but he remembered that he didn't have a lawyer, so he ended with "Your obedient servant," and signed his name. He'd probably have to find a lawyer soon.

By the time Kronsky actually ate his shredded wheat, minus the finger, took a shower, and shaved, moved his bowels, and found a fairly clean shirt, it was time for the treat he had been promising himself all week. The features had changed at the downtown movie houses, and *Sex-Kitten Stewardesses* was playing at the Rialto, the early-early show. Kronsky knew it was an old movie, because they were called flight attendants now, but he didn't care. Last week, when he'd seen *Bible-Belt Babies* about those lust-hungry preachers' wives in Kansas, the preview for this week had intrigued him. He'd never been in an airplane, but he still didn't think those girls could do all those things in a cockpit that the movie portrayed. Anyway, he meant to see the whole movie this afternoon and find out.

Kronsky joined the line of about a dozen other middle-aged men in shabby rain coats for the one o'clock showing. He stopped at the candy stand in the lobby and indulged in one of his other passions, chocolate-covered peanuts. He paid, stuffed the box in the pocket of his raincoat, and found a seat.

About half-way through the movie, Kronsky remembered his box of candy. He fumbled it out of his pocket, opened it, and began eating. When he couldn't reach the level of candy any more with his two fingers, he tilted the box quietly, so as not to disturb the other patrons, and poured the remaining candy into his hand.

Carefully, he placed a piece in his mouth, sucking lightly to dissolve the chocolate while the peanut remained intact. Once the peanut was cleaned of chocolate, he'd separate it with his tongue, then slowly chew one half at a time, until only the essence remained in his saliva. He ate two or three this way. The last



remaining piece in his hand he held on to until almost the end of the movie. Then, as the credits were rolling across the screen, he slipped the last piece into his mouth. Not tasting chocolate and not feeling peanut, he realized that something was wrong, and spit into his handkerchief just as the house lights came up. Kronsky stayed in his seat until the theater had emptied, and then inspected his handkerchief.

After that morning's experience, Kronsky was not upset, although he did taste peanuts and chocolate rising at the back of his throat for a moment. He swallowed hard and held the spit-out object up to the light. It was about the size of a chocolate-covered peanut, brown, and slightly shriveled. He sniffed at it, detecting an odor of chocolate, peanuts, and cardboard. He turned it around to notice a small, curved nail on one end. It was, he decided, a toe. A small toe, from a right-hand foot, judging by its curve. Also, from a black person. The thought that he had put a black person's severed toe in his mouth made Kronsky feel queasy, and wrapping the toe in his handkerchief, he retrieved the candy box from under the seat where he had deposited it, tucked the toe inside and put the box in his pocket. He then went out to the lobby, bought a Coke, and drank it down, fast. He thought he could still taste toe on his tongue, but it occurred to him that this was impossible, since he'd never actually tasted a toe before, at least, not a black one.

Driving home, composing a letter in his head to the chocolate-covered peanut company similar to the shredded wheat letter he'd written that morning, Kronsky decided to stop at the grocery store in his neighborhood. He still had some money left from the severance pay, and he knew that his cupboards were almost bare. He had pretty much settled on a few frozen turkey tv dinners for his meal, when his bowels gave a lurch, reminding him that he'd promised himself to include more roughage in his diet. His piles were really starting to get to him.

He checked out the produce department, hefting heads of lettuce, cabbage, and cauliflower, and squeezing the carrots through their plastic bags. He continued on past the fresh broccoli, down the aisle to the canned fruit and vegetables, and decided to treat himself, instead, to a box of dried apricots. Convincing himself that apricots were still fruit, and good for regularity because they were on the shelf next to the dried prunes, which Kronsky hated, he paid for his purchases and started home.

Kronsky had cramps in the car on the way home, probably, he thought, from the chocolate-covered peanuts, so he opened the box of dried apricots with one hand and his teeth, and reached in. They were fairly moist, and Kronsky almost rear-ended the guy in front of him, trying to separate one or two apricots from the clump in the box. He finally got one out. Chewing slowly, Kronsky savored the tart-sweetness of the apricot. It got stuck in his molars, though, and for the remainder of the drive home he was kept busy rescuing trapped morsels from the spaces between his fillings.

Just before bedtime, Kronsky spent a half hour in the bathroom, trying to convince his bowels to move. They did not, and he, not wishing to waste the same amount of time the next morning, went to his box of apricots. He took the interior cellophane bag out of the box, searching for the plumpest ones. He noticed one especially large one, buried in the center of the clump, and went after it. It was a little different colored from the others, more pink than orange, and the swirls and whorls on it seemed more defined. Kronsky noticed some yellow fuzz on it, too, that the others didn't have. As he bit into it, he noticed a distinctive lack of apricot flavor. It seemed almost crunchy, and didn't dissolve in his mouth the way the other apricots had. With a sinking feeling in his gut, Kronsky pulled the thing off his teeth and really looked at it. He carried it into the bathroom, stood in front of the mirror and held it up to the side of his head. No doubt about it, it was an ear. Kronsky carefully placed the ear on the ledge of the sink, and lowering his pants, sat down on the toilet seat. His bowels moved.

The next morning Kronsky sat at the kitchen table with all of his discoveries of yesterday assembled in front of him. He had written his letters to the companies he supposed were responsible for their being there, and he had decided to spend the morning finding a lawyer to represent him, although, since *he* was finding it hard to believe that the same thing had happened to him three times in one day, he wondered if any lawyer would either. Still, he had the proof.

Deciding to fortify himself with breakfast before beginning his search, Kronsky took his last remaining egg out of the refrigerator and cracked it into a bowl. He looked down as he was about

to scramble it with his fork. There, in place of the yolk, was an eyeball, complete with blue iris, black pupil, and threads of red bloodshot throughout the white. Kronsky placed his hands behind him to keep from dumping it down the sink and clenched his jaws to keep from screaming. After several seconds, he found the broken egg shell in the trash, poured the eyeball into one half, and carefully, with Elmer's Glue, rejoined the edges of the shell. He added it to the row of spare parts on the table. Then, he passed out.

When he awoke, Kronsky's first feeling was the cold from the kitchen floor. His second feeling was relief, that this had all been a bad dream, and his third feeling, as he pulled himself up, was panic. All his nightmares were still on the table.

He found a paper grocery bag and placed each item at the bottom, taking great care not to drop the egg. He placed the three letters he had written on top, taped the bag shut, and took it out, down the hallway. When he came to the apartment incinerator, he opened it and quickly dropped in the bag. Then he ran back to his apartment and sat, doing nothing, thinking nothing, until sundown.

Kronsky's favorite bar was in a rough neighborhood. It was Kronsky's favorite because it sold cheap whiskey at cheap prices, no one talked to him there, and since the bartender had seen him in his subway cop's uniform once he let Kronsky run a tab. Kronsky hurried toward the bar now as the street lights came on. As he scuttled across the entrance to an alley, a hand shot out, catching his arm, whirling him around, his face up against a brick wall. He smelled a sour breath and felt saliva spray the back of his neck.

"Where is it?"

Kronsky was at a loss. "What?" he stammered.

"You have some things that belong to me," a raspy voice insisted. "Where are they?"

When Kronsky didn't answer, he was grabbed by the hair, his nose mashed into the brick. When he opened his eyes, Kronsky could see the hand holding him by the light of the street lamp. It had three fingers, the pinky missing.

"Oh, God," Kronsky groaned. The man turned him around. He was tall, with a seaman's cap pulled down over his head. He had a patch over one eye and several missing teeth.

Kronsky wondered when he was meant to find those.

"I'll be by your place tomorrow," the man told him, throwing him to the ground. "You'd better have it then. *All* of it, or I'll expect replacements."

As he lay there, Kronsky saw the man limp off into the night. He didn't think he'd miss a finger or a toe, or even an ear, but he wondered, Kronsky did, if it would be hard to find work with only one eye.

Hellcatcher

by STEVEN POPKES

He found her behind the stairway,
her throat sliced open *delicately*,
her mouth turned up at the corners,
as if she'd felt something divine
just before she died.

She pushed past him on the subway, knocking him nearly to the floor. A stranger, and Berendzen wished her dead. One quick jump down through the doors and she was gone.

Berendzen picked himself up, raging. *God*. He hated her, the subway, and people in general. A month before he would have driven into the city and two weeks before he would have taken his bicycle. The car had thrown a rod and the bicycle had been stolen. The underground was the only way left into work. He left it murderous each morning. It was every little coldness, every small injury to his psyche, every pain that Boston gave him, personified, making him less a human being and more an automaton each day.

He found her as he passed behind the stairway. For a long, still moment he only absorbed what had happened in a kind of detached vision: her throat had been sliced across *delicately*—and the blood had made a wet carpet over cigarette butts, indigent's urine, and junk-food wrappers. Her mouth was open and turned up at the corners, as if she had felt something divine just as she died. Her eyes were filmed over blue.

Then he was retching, gagging, choking, trying to avoid vomiting on *her*. *Did I do that?* he thought. *Could I have possibly done that?* Somebody cried out further toward the train and there was the sound of running feet. A whisper: "*Jesus.*"

It was hours before they let him leave the police station. A bored looking detective had made him report what had happened over and over until Berendzen wished *his* throat had been cut. Then they told him to go home.

Home consisted of a duplex in Watertown. He sat at the kitchen table, hunched over, still wearing his raincoat, staring at the linoleum.

"Richie? Can you move the—Good God! You look terrible." It was Norman Vancell, the other half-owner of the duplex. He helped Berendzen into bed as the story was tumbled into his ear. Vancell made sympathetic noises and brought Berendzen ice water.

"Can you stay for a while?" Berendzen tried to take his eyes from the ceiling, couldn't.

"Sure. No problem. Are you hungry?"

The question nauseated him.

He called in sick the next two days. No one bothered to be irritated with him; he just wasn't that important. He sat on the porch in the thick Boston summer.

Vancell came home in the middle of the afternoon and sat next to him. "Taking a mental health day, I see."

Berendzen smiled. He liked Vancell, had liked him since they met as neighbors in the city. Vancell had made the suggestion of buying the duplex. At the time, Berendzen had become so frightened of the city he had stopped going out. Vancell had said it had been something he had wanted to do for years, but had never found a congenial partner. Neither of them had the funds alone to buy a place. Between the two of them they had had just barely enough. Thus was formed the quiet island that allowed Berendzen to stay sane.

Vancell had seemed to benefit, also. When Berendzen had met him, he was a nervous, painfully shy man. Now he seemed to enjoy talking. They had much in common: they were bureaucrats in city hall, they liked quiet, and they both only entered the city when they had to. Berendzen smiled, considering Vancell. "I

suppose," he answered.

"Understandable."

Berendzen felt better not being alone. "This town is hell. Such a thing to happen."

Vancell didn't say anything for a few minutes. "You think of hell as a place? I always thought of it more as a person."

"A person?"

"Yeah. Think about it, hell as an environment inside some guy. All those tortured souls trapped inside a single man. Certainly, that would be more *interesting* than someplace fiery and underground."

Berendzen stared at him, laughed. "That," he said succinctly, "is a hell of an idea."

The next day Berendzen went back to work.

Come to me little one, mi novio, escucha mi, for I hear you. Closer, closer into the shadows where no one sees, into the shadows that could be me. Beautiful man, beloved—closer yet. Yes, yes, you have nothing to fear, such are the strong, the lovely. Can you hear us, hear us singing to you? Escucha mi, mira mi. You have nothing to fear, only the ones around you. Escucha mi—he comes into the shadows, listen. Novio, we sing to you. Touch him, ask the time—listen, lover—he has no watch? A pull—the balance is lost, no? Das Gleichgewicht, l'équilibre—a caress of steel and baptism. We wash in him, bathe in—quiet, mi novio. Quiet. Look into me and see the company—quiet. We sing for you. We bathe in him for you, drink the salty seas, the tides, the torrents. We wait, he among us, wait. A spring and a touch and catwalking across the rails into the darkness, soft darkness—scurrying.

A month had passed, a lunar cycle of quiet bordered by paying bills with money he didn't have and a daily job he hated. Though he hadn't forgotten the dead woman, he had isolated her inside his memories. He no longer felt guilty. Such things happened. He was not responsible. And now, again, he was in the underground.

A tall young man in an expensive suit walked near him, smelling of aftershave and saddlesoap. He looked down at Berendzen, sitting on the bench, and seemed to figure Berendzen's yearly salary at a glance. It was obviously not enough and the

young man looked away. Berendzen wanted to spit on him, shouting, who the hell are you to look down on *me*? "Son of a bitch," he muttered. The man walked behind an advertising sign, behind Berendzen and out of sight.

His mind had been so dulled by the return to routine that at first he didn't even notice the executive's feet next to the bench. They were as much a part of the subway as the bums sleeping in the foyer, the punk kid's radio blasting rock and roll into the echoing concrete tunnel. They wore brown wingtips. They weren't moving.

He stared at them, not frightened this time, excited only. Even the shoes of sleeping winos moved when they breathed, and these shoes belonged to no wino. The body was hidden.

He looked behind the sign and saw the blood, the hideous slash that gaped like a drunkard's grin. The blood filmed over and began to harden as he watched. Someone laughed softly and Berendzen's head jerked toward the sound. He could see only the thighs and knees; the rest was in shadows, a pair of eyes glowing red in the darkness.

Berendzen stood up, shaking, and the eyes were gone. The body was still there. He stared at it again, turned, and left the subway.

Vancell found him on the front porch, a pint of bourbon two-thirds empty next to his chair.

"Sit down," muttered Berendzen.

Vancell leaned against the porch railing. "Something happen?"

Berendzen laughed, offered the bottle. Vancell refused. Berendzen drained it, coughed, kept himself from vomiting. "Found another one," he said when he could speak again.

"Another what?"

"*Body!* Another *body*. Dead on the Kenmore Station floor. Probably better off dead, too." Tears fell down his cheeks. He blew his nose on his sleeve. "And I saw him."

"Who?"

"*Him*. The guy you talked about. Hell. He was watching me find it. Red eyes and such a laugh." A lover's laugh, he suddenly realized.

"Hey, that was just an idea—"

"S'true. I saw him. He killed a guy just to show me."

Vancell looked away from him, down the street. It was

twilight, the moon nearly full and new risen, red, bloated. Berendzen thought he could see stars through the shadows on its surface. It was, he saw, the color of Hell's eyes.

"Show you what?" Vancell was looking back at him.

"Damned if I know." Did he have another bottle under the kitchen sink? He couldn't remember.

"I had a cat once. She used to bring me birds and mice. Left them at the foot of my bed. She took a bird apart in the bathroom one time and the place was a foot deep in feathers."

"What are you talking about? What. Are. You. Talking. About?"

Vancell was backlit by the streetlight. Berendzen couldn't see the expression on his face. "Maybe he likes you. Maybe these are presents."

He was fired for not showing up at work. This was fine by him—it meant he didn't have to run the subway gauntlet anymore. He lived on his meager savings, sat on the porch and drank his way through whatever liquor he found under the sink. Three weeks after he had found the dead man at Kenmore Square, he finished the last of the Kahlua, and the last of the liquor, watching a cat pouncing on a sparrow. When the bottle was empty, the sparrow was a matted lump of feathers.

What he was, he realized through the haze of alcohol, was a coaster. He had coasted into an easy job—he didn't want to go job hunting. He had run from the city. He had coasted away from sex—he didn't want to go look for it. Vancell was very nearly his only friend and Berendzen had just met him through luck.

Now, somebody liked him enough—*loved* him enough; he could still remember that lover's laugh—to kill for him. There was no doubt in his mind that the killings were both done for him. Had he not hated both victims the instant before they were dead? Were they not the only killings of their type to appear in Boston? They were his. He, who had never had strong feeling except anger and rage, wondered that he could cause love, however strange, in someone else. And in Hell. He wondered how Hell had come to be.

He's not Hell at all, Berendzen said to himself. That's just an idea Vancell had. Berendzen wished the killer *was* Hell. He



poked a finger unsteadily into the air. The guy is crazy. Gonzo. Bonkers. He's just *attached* himself to you, but *you* don't really matter.

Maybe. The thought made him sad.

Sad? What about the man and the woman, dead just because they were around you when you got angry? He didn't really care about them. What had moved him was the shock, not the fact, of their murders. He shook his head. He mistrusted drunken insights.

Still, the killer was there. He existed. He was real. Berendzen wanted to find him, determine who he was. Berendzen's hands shook as he realized how much he wanted that.

When Vancell got home he was sober.

Vancell knocked on his door along about his sixth cup of coffee. Berendzen had swallowed seven vitamin capsules, an anti-nausea drug he had found in the medicine cabinet and could not pronounce, two aspirins, and a diet pill. He was dead serious about being sober.

Vancell watched him a moment. "Something happened," he stated.

Berendzen could have kissed him. "Yeah, something's happened. I'm going after him."

Vancell didn't respond immediately. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"Who cares? I'm tired of coasting."

Vancell sat next to him at the table. He looked suddenly tired. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. Have you got a gun?"

"You should go to the police."

"To *hell* with the police. They had their chance when they talked to me the first time. Nothing. They could have called me when it happened a second time. They knew where I was. There was obviously a connection. Nothing. *I* want to find him. Not for them, not for the two-plus-how-many people he's killed, but for me. Have you got a *gun*?"

Vancell was quiet a moment, left, then returned, this time with a handgun. It was a .357 magnum police special. Berendzen could have dived down the barrel and never touched the sides.

"God, it's huge. What do you keep that thing around for?"

"I don't know. It's good for shooting Russian tanks."

"What?" He looked at Vancell narrowly. Sometimes it was hard to know when he was joking.

Vancell held up his hands and shrugged. "Peace. Bought it before gun control. I've had it a long time. It's not registered."

Berendzen pocketed the gun in his jacket. "Thanks." He finished his cup of coffee.

"Are you going to kill him?"

Berendzen pulled out the gun, looked at it, put it back. "I don't know." He chuckled, turned back to Vancell. "Nobody ever loved me like this before. I don't know what I'm going to do."

South Station smelled. It stank of old age and restless dreams and diversion from empty lives. He nodded to himself. He liked that image.

He had been riding the subway for nine hours now, waiting at each station for twenty or thirty minutes, then taking a car at random to the next. The romantic energy that had propelled him was wearing thin and the gun made a bulky, lead-heavy lump in his pocket.

He searched the shadows. No luck. He hoped he would find—Hell? was the man really Hell?—without having someone else die, but he didn't really care. No, that wasn't true, he reasoned. He cared about the killer. Berendzen wondered if he had gone crazy and decided it didn't matter. It was as easy to hate the victims as it was to hate the murderer. Easier, for the victims never followed him around, never showed him any response. They, like everyone else in the city, ate, slept, and breathed indifference. He knew that no one would mourn if he were killed. Except Vancell, maybe, and Hell.

A guard saw him in the shadows and looked annoyed. Fear pulsed through Berendzen because of the gun, then a momentary anger. Resolutely, he moved to place a column between himself and the guard. He felt suddenly strange, as if he could feel the events he had set in motion. His forehead felt hot and he leaned it against the cool concrete of the column.

Quiet, foot-bare, a rat here, a rat there—mi alma, mi caro—wait, wait for me. Watersoft footsteps, approach—No! Not giftless. Nicht Gabeloss. Wait, we wait, we sing to you. Wait—

heavy pendulous uniform, heavy pendulous man. A gift! Giving to my/our love. Now, a touch, a fall—ease to the ground—a sound. He turns! He sees!

There was the sound of quick breathing, a sound like that of a soda bottle being opened suddenly, and another of something cloth-bound striking pavement. Berendzen turned from the light and the column and faced shadows.

Dead on the ground lay the subway guard. Over him, in shadow and frenzy and lit only by his red, red eyes, stood Hell himself.

Berendzen stared into those eyes, felt the fury, the pain, the torture, the lost and damned souls, the glory—Hell broke Berendzen's gaze with his hand and Berendzen looked down. Silence.

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely, part of him lost forever.

"Berendzen, my love," whispered Hell, ignoring the question.

He looked up and Hell was running, leaping in the flourescent glare. Berendzen looked at the body, back into the subway stop, then ran after him.

Hell capered, Hell danced, Hell pirouetted in a mad ballet across the tracks, ducking into recesses, tumbling through cracks in the walls. His face was a parody of human emotions and scarcely seemed human at all. It looked like nothing Berendzen had ever seen. The lines were too stark, too real for recognition. It drew him, pulled at him, caught him in a vortex of fear, anger, and passion.

Berendzen chased him doggedly, stumbled, opened his knee against a track-tie splinter, struck the wall, and broke his wrist. He followed like a rabid disciple, forgetting the pain, desperate to catch the grotesque.

The tracks vibrated, the air moved—a train shot down the tunnel toward them. Berendzen fell again. Hell stopped dancing and was suddenly a blur of movement, inhumanly fast. He grabbed Berendzen's belt and threw him away from the tracks, leaped away himself over the third rail as it arced violet.

Hell screamed in a thousand voices, screamed down the length and breadth of the tunnel. It was a sound that made the dead rise and walk, that made the beasts shiver and women deliver monsters. He screamed and hid in a recess as the train roared past.

Berendzen felt the scream stop his heart, freeze him to the

ground, fill him with the fear of death. Then the train was past. Hell whimpered away over a wall of broken masonry.

The tunnel was quiet. Berendzen could hear voices from the station a few hundred feet away. Sobbing, he forced himself to stand, to follow Hell over the wall.

He staggered up a twisted flight of stairs, pushed himself through a broken, rusted grating, and fell on a deserted sidewalk downtown. There was no one there. He coughed, forced something out, spat, wept, then made his way home.

He sat on the steps of the porch, too tired to move. He didn't hate Hell at all, he knew, but Hell's victims, the soulless, mindless swarm that swallowed Berendzen up each day and disgorged him each night. Not just in the subway, but anywhere. They didn't care if he existed, didn't want to know. He *liked* seeing them dead. He knew he would look for Hell again.

He heard a soft, painful sound from Vancell's side of the duplex. He entered, wondering.

"Vancell?" he called, then pulled out the gun. Somebody could have broken in.

Vancell lay curled up on the sofa, holding his burned, charred leg. Already, new skin was growing over it. He was naked and Berendzen could see his body was a criss-crossed network of scars, broken limbs and wrinkled age. Hell had been around a long time.

Hell looked at him, tears coming from those red, blind, empty eyes. Berendzen felt what he had felt before, felt the loneliness that sparked his own, the pain of Hell. He threw away the gun and fell next to Vancell and held him in his arms, grasping hold of that madness and pain for himself.

When he released Vancell, his eyes were as red as Hell's own.

THE YUGOSLAVES

by ROBERT BLOCH

The Parisian spring had lost its charm.
The weather was poor, the air acrid;
the young men dressed like vandals,
and fiendish children lurked in the shadows.

I didn't come to Paris for adventure. Long experience has taught me there are no Phantoms in the Opera, no bearded artists hobbling through Montmartre on stunted legs, no straw-hatted *boulevardiers* singing the praises of a funny little honey of a Mimi.

The Paris of story and song, if it ever existed, is no more. Times have changed, and even the term "Gay Paree" now evokes what in theatrical parlance is called a bad laugh.

A visitor learns to change habits accordingly, and my hotel choice was a case in point. On previous trips I'd stayed at the Crillon or the Ritz; now, after a lengthy absence, I put up at the George V.

Let me repeat, I wasn't seeking adventure. That first evening I left the hotel for a short stroll merely to satisfy my curiosity about the city.

I had already discovered that some aspects of Paris remain immutable; the French still don't seem to understand how to communicate by telephone, and they can't make a good cup of coffee. But I had no need to use the phone and no craving for coffee, so these matters didn't concern me.

Nor was I greatly surprised to discover that April in Paris—*Paris in the spring, tra-la-la-la*—is apt to be cold and damp. Warmly-dressed for my little outing, I directed my footsteps to the archways of the Rue de Rivoli.

At first glance Paris by night upheld its traditions. All of the

tourist attractions remained in place; the steel skeleton of the Eiffel Tower, the gaping maw of the Arch of Triumph, the spurting fountains achieving their miraculous transubstantiation of water into blood with the aid of crimson light.

But there were changes in the air—quite literally—the acrid odor of traffic fumes emanating from the exhausts of snarling sports cars and growling motor bikes racing along to the counterpoint of police and ambulance sirens. Gershwin's tinny taxi-horns would be lost in such din; I doubt if he'd approve, and I most certainly did not.

My disapproval extended to the clothing of local pedestrians. Young Parisian males now mimicked the youths of other cities; bare-headed, leather-jacketed, and blue-jeaned, they would look equally at home in Times Square or on Hollywood Boulevard. As for their female companions, this seemed to be the year when every girl in France decided to don atrociously-wrinkled patent leather boots which turned shapely lower limbs into the legs of elephantiasis victims. The *chic* Parisienne had vanished, and above the traffic's tumult I fancied I could detect a sound of rumbling dismay as Napoleon turned over in his tomb.

I moved along under the arches, eyeing the lighted window displays of expensive jewelry mingled with cheap gimcracks. At least the Paris of tourism hadn't altered; there would still be sex shops in the Pigalle, and somewhere in the deep darkness of the Louvre the Mona Lisa smiled enigmatically at the antics of those who came to the city searching for adventure.

Again I say this was not my intention. Nonetheless, adventure sought me.

Adventure came on the run, darting out of a dark and deserted portion of the arcade just ahead, charging straight at me on a dozen legs.

It happened quickly. One moment I was alone; then suddenly and without warning, the children came. There were six of them, surrounding me like a small army—six dark-haired swarthy-skinned urchins in dirty, dishevelled garments, screeching and jabbering at me in a foreign tongue. Some of them clutched at my clothing, others jabbed me in the ribs. Encircling me they clamored for a beggar's bounty, and as I fumbled for loose change one of them thrust a folded newspaper against my chest, another grabbed and kissed my free hand, yet another grasped my shoulder and whirled me around. Deafened by the din, dazed by

their instant attack, I broke free.

In seconds, they scattered swiftly and silently, scampering into the shadows. As they disappeared I stood alone again, stunned and shaken. Then, as my hand rose instinctively to press against my inner breast pocket, I realized that my wallet had disappeared too.

My first reaction was shock. To think that I, a grown man, had been robbed on the public street by a band of little ragamuffins, less than ten years old!

It was an outrage, and now I met it with rage of my own. The sheer audacity of their attack provoked anger, and the thought of the consequences fueled my fury. Losing the money in the wallet wasn't important; he who steals my purse steals trash.

But there was something else I cherished; something secret and irreplaceable. I carried it in a billfold compartment for a purpose; after completing my sightseeing jaunt I'd intended to seek another destination and make use of the other item my wallet contained.

Now it was gone, and hope vanished with it.

But not entirely. The sound of distant sirens in the night served as a strident reminder that I still had a chance. There was, I remembered, a police station near the Place Vendome. The inconspicuous office was not easy to locate on the darkened street beyond an open courtyard, but I managed.

Once inside, I anticipated a conversation with an *Inspecteur*, a return to the scene of the affair in the company of sympathetic *gendarmes* who were knowledgeable concerning such offenses and alert in ferreting out the hiding place of my assailants.

The young lady seated behind the window in the dingy outer office listened to my story without comment or a change of expression. Inserting forms and carbons in her typewriter, she took down a few vital statistics—my name, date of birth, place of origin, hotel address, and a short inventory of the stolen wallet's contents.

For reasons of my own I neglected to mention the one item that really mattered to me. I could be excused for omitting it in my excited state, and hoped to avoid the necessity of doing so unless the *Inspecteur* questioned me more closely.

But there was no interview with an *Inspecteur*, and no uniformed officer appeared. Instead I was merely handed a carbon copy of the *Recepisse de Declaration*; if anything could be learned about the fate of my wallet I would be notified at my hotel.

Scarcely ten minutes after entering the station I found myself back on the street with nothing to show for my trouble but a buff-colored copy of the report. Down at the very bottom, on a line identified in print as *Mode Opératoire—Precisions Complémentaires*, was a typed sentence reading "*Vol commis dans la Rue par de jeunes enfant yougoslaves.*"

"Yougoslaves?"

Back at the hotel I addressed the question to an elderly night-clerk. Sleepy eyes blinking into nervousness, he nodded knowingly.

"Ah!" he said. "The gypsies!"

"Gypsies? But these were only children—"

He nodded again. "Exactly so." And then he told me the story.

Pickpockets and purse-snatchers had always been a common nuisance here, but within the past few years their presence had escalated.

They came out of Eastern Europe, their exact origin unknown, but "yougoslaves" or "gypsies" served as a convenient label.

Apparently they were smuggled in by skillful and enterprising adult criminals who specialized in educating children in the art of thievery, very much as Fagin trained his youngsters in the London of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

But Fagin was an amateur compared to today's professors of pilfering. Their pupils—orphans, products of broken homes, or no homes at all—were recruited in foreign city streets, or even purchased outright from greedy, uncaring parents. These little ones could be quite valuable; an innocent at the age of four or five became a seasoned veteran after a few years of experience, capable of bringing in as much as a hundred thousand American dollars over the course of a single year.

When I described the circumstances of my own encounter the clerk shrugged.

"Of course. That is how they work, my friend—in gangs." Gangs, expertly adept in spotting potential victims, artfully instructed how to operate. Their seemingly spontaneous outcries were actually the product of long and exacting rehearsal, their apparently impromptu movements perfected in advance. They danced around me because they had been choreographed to do so. It was a bandits' ballet in which each one played an assigned role—to nudge, to gesture, to jab and jabber and create confusion. Even the hand-kissing was part of a master plan, and when one ragged waif thrust his folded newspaper against my chest it concealed

another who ducked below and lifted my wallet. The entire performance was programmed down to the last detail.

I listened and shook my head. "Why don't the police tell me these things? Surely they must know."

"*Oui, M'sieur.*" The clerk permitted himself a confidential wink. "But perhaps they do not care." He leaned across the desk, his voice sinking to a murmur. "Some say an arrangement has been made. The yougoslaves are skilled in identifying tourists by their dress and manner. They can recognize a foreign visitor merely by the kind of shoes he wears. One supposes a bargain has been struck because it is only the tourists who are attacked, while ordinary citizens are spared."

I frowned. "Surely others like myself must lodge complaints. One would think the police would be forced to take action."

The clerk's gesture was as eloquent as his words. "But what can they do? These yougoslaves strike quickly, without warning. They vanish before you realize what has happened, and no one knows where they go. And even if you managed to lay hands on one of them, what then? You bring this youngster to the police and tell your story, but the little ruffian has no wallet—you can be sure it was passed along immediately to another who ran off with the evidence. Also, your prisoner cannot speak or understand French, or at least pretends not to.

"So the gendarmes have nothing to go by but your words, and what can they do with the kid if they did have proof, when the law prohibits the arrest and jailing of children under thirteen?

"It's all part of the scheme. And if you permit me, it is a beautiful scheme, this one."

My frown told him I lacked appreciation of beauty, and he quickly leaned back to a position of safety behind the desk, his voice and manner sobering. "Missing credit cards can be reported in the morning, though I think it unlikely anyone would be foolish enough to attempt using them with a forged signature. It's the money they were after."

"I have other funds in your safe," I said.

"*Tres bien.* In that case I advise you to make the best of things. Now that you know what to expect, I doubt if you will be victimized again. Just keep away from the tourist traps and avoid using the Metro." He offered me the solace of a smile which all desk clerks reserve for complaints about stalled elevators, lost luggage, faulty electrical fixtures, or clogged plumbing.

Then, when my frown remained fixed, his smile vanished. "Please, my friend! I understand this has been a most distressing occurrence, but I trust you will chalk it up to experience. Believe me, there is no point in pursuing the matter further."

I shook my head. "If the police won't go after these children—" "Children?" Again his voice descended to a murmur. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear. The yougoslaves are not ordinary kids. As I say, they have been trained by masters. The kind of man who is capable of buying or stealing a child and corrupting it for a life of crime is not likely to stop there. I have heard certain rumors, *M'sieur*, rumors which make a dreadful sort of sense. These kids, they are hooked on drugs. They know every manner of vice but nothing of morals, and many carry knives, even guns. Some have been taught to break and enter into homes, and if discovered, to kill. Their masters, of course, are even more dangerous when crossed. I implore you, for your own safety—forget what has happened tonight and go on your way."

"Thank you for your advice." I managed a smile and went on my way. But I did not forget.

I did not forget what had happened, nor did I forget I'd been robbed of what was most precious to me.

Retiring to my room, I placed the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the outer doorknob and after certain makeshift arrangements I sank eventually into fitful slumber.

By the following evening I was ready; ready and waiting. Paris by night is the City of Light, but it is also the city of shadows. And it was in the shadows that I waited, the shadows under the archways of the Rue de Rivoli. My dark clothing was deliberately donned to blend inconspicuously with the background; I would be unnoticed if the predators returned to seek fresh prey.

Somehow I felt convinced that they would do so. As I stood against a pillar, scanning the occasional passerby who wandered past, I challenged myself to see the hunted through the eyes of the hunters.

Who would be the next victim? That party of Japanese deserved no more than a glance of dismissal; it wasn't wise to confront a group. By the same token, those who traveled in pairs or couples would be spared. And even the lone pedestrians were safe if they were able-bodied or dressed in garments which identified them as local citizens.

What the hunters sought was someone like myself, someone

wearing clothing of foreign cut, preferably elderly and obviously alone. Someone like the grey-headed old gentleman who was approaching now, shuffling past a cluster of shops already closed for the night. He was short, slight of build, and his uncertain gait hinted at either a physical impairment or mild intoxication. A lone traveler on an otherwise-deserted stretch of street—he was the perfect target for attack.

And the attack came.

Out of the deep dark doorway to an arcade the yougoslaves danced forth, squealing and gesticulating, to suddenly surround their startled victim.

They ringed him, hands outstretched, their cries confusing, their fingers darting forth to prod and pry in rhythm with the outbursts.

I saw the pattern now, recognized the roles they played. Here was the hand-kisser, begging for bounty, here the duo tugging at each arm from the rear, here the biggest of the boys, brandishing the folded paper to thrust it against the oldster's chest while an accomplice burrowed into the gaping front of the jacket below. Just behind him the sixth and smallest of the band stood poised. The instant the wallet was snatched it would be passed to him, and while the others continued their distraction for a few moments more before scattering, he'd run off in safety.

The whole charade was brilliant in its sheer simplicity, cleverly contrived so that the poor old gentleman would never notice his loss until too late.

But I noticed—and I acted.

As the thieves closed in I stepped forward, quickly and quietly. Intent on their quarry, they were unaware of my approach. Moving up behind the youngster who waited to receive the wallet, I grasped his upraised arm in a tight grip, bending it back against his shoulderblade as I yanked him away into the shadows. He looked up and my free hand clamped across his oval mouth before he could cry out.

He tried to bite, but my fingers pressed his lips together. He tried to kick, but I twisted his bent arm and tugged him along offbalance, his feet dragging over the pavement as we moved past the shadowy archway to the curb beyond.

My rental car was waiting there. Opening the door, I hurled him down onto the seat face-forward. Before he could turn I pulled the handcuffs from my pocket and snapped them shut over his wrists.



Locking the passenger door, I hastened around to the other side of the car and entered, sliding behind the wheel. Seconds later we were moving out into the traffic.

Hands confined behind him, my captive threshed helplessly beside me. He could scream now, and he did.

"Stop that!" I commanded. "No one can hear you with the windows closed."

After a moment he obeyed. As we turned off onto a side street he glared up at me, panting.

"*Merde!*" he gasped.

I smiled. "So you speak French, do you?"

There was no reply. But when the car turned again, entering one of the narrow alleyways off the Rue St. Roch, his eyes grew wary.

"Where are we going?"

"That is a question for you to answer."

"What do you mean?"

"You will be good enough to direct me to the place where I can find your friends."

"Go to hell!"

"*Au contraire.*" I smiled again. "If you do not cooperate, and quickly, I'll knock you over the head and dump your body in the Seine."

"You old bastard—you can't scare me!"

Releasing my right hand from the steering wheel I gave him a clout across the mouth, knocking him back against the seat.

"That's a sample," I told him. "Next time I won't be so gentle." Clenching my fist, I raised my arm again, and he cringed.

"Tell me!" I said.

And he did.

The blow across the mouth seemed to have loosened his tongue, for he began to answer my questions as I reversed our course and crossed over a bridge which brought us to the Left Bank.

When he told me our destination and described it, I must confess I was surprised. The distance was much greater than I anticipated, and finding the place would not be easy, but I followed his directions on a mental map. Meanwhile I encouraged Bobo to speak.

That was his name—Bobo. If he had another he claimed he did not know it, and I believed him. He was nine years old but he'd been with the gang for three of them, ever since their leader

spirited him off the streets of Dubrovnik and brought him here to Paris on a long and illegal route while hidden in the back of a truck.

"Dubrovnik?" I nodded. "Then you really are a yougoslave. What about the others?"

"I don't know. They come from everywhere. Wherever he finds them."

"Your leader? What's his name?"

"We call him Le Boss."

"He taught you how to steal like this?"

"He taught us many things," Bobo gave me a sidelong glance. "Listen to me, old man—if you find him there will be big trouble. Better to let me go."

"Not until I have my wallet."

"Wallet?" His eyed widened, then narrowed, and I realized that for the first time he'd recognized me as last night's victim. "If you think Le Boss will give you back your money then you really are a fool."

"I'm not a fool. And I don't care about the money."

"Credit cards? Don't worry, Le Boss won't try to use them. Too risky."

"It's not the cards. There was something else. Didn't you see it?"

"I never touched your wallet. It was Pepe who took it to the van last night."

The van, I learned, was always parked just around the corner from the spot where the gang set up operations. And it was there that they fled after a robbery. Le Boss waited behind the wheel with the motor running; the stolen property was turned over to him immediately as they drove off to safer surroundings.

"So Le Boss has the wallet now," I said.

"Perhaps. Sometimes he takes the money out and throws the billfold away. But if there was more than money and cards inside as you say—" Bobo hesitated, peering up at me. "What is this thing you're looking for?"

"That is a matter I will discuss with Le Boss when I see him."

"Diamonds, maybe? You a smuggler?"

"No."

His eyes brightened and he nodded quickly. "Cocaine? Don't worry, I get some for you, no problem—good stuff, not the junk they cut for street trade. All you want, and cheap, too."

I shook my head. "Stop guessing. I talk only to Le Boss."

But Bobo continued to eye me as I guided the car out of the suburban residential and industrial areas, through a stretch of barren countryside, and into an unpaved side road bordering the empty lower reaches of the river. There were no lights here, no dwellings, no signs of life—only shadows, silence, and swaying trees.

Bobo was getting nervous, but now he forced a smile.

"Hey, old man—you like girls? Le Boss got one the other day."

"Not interested."

"I mean *little* girls. Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—"

I shook my head again and he sidled closer on the seat. "What about boys? I'm good, you'll see. Even Le Boss says so—"

He rubbed against me; his clothes were filthy and he smelled of sweat and garlic. "Never mind," I said quickly, pushing him away.

"Okay," he murmured. "I figured if we did a deal you'd give up trying to see Le Boss. It's just going to make things bad for you, and there's no sense getting yourself hurt."

"I appreciate your concern," I smiled. "But it's not me you're really worried about. You'll be the one who gets hurt for bringing me, is that not so?"

He stared at me without replying but I read the answer in his fear-filled eyes.

"What will he do to you?" I said.

The fear spilled over into his voice. "Please, *M'sieu*—don't tell him how you got here! I will do anything you want, anything—"

"You'll do exactly what I say," I told him.

He glanced ahead, and again I read his eyes.

"Are we here?" I asked. "Is this the place?"

"*Oui*. But—"

"Be silent." I shut off the motor and headlights, but not before the beam betrayed a glimpse of the river bank beyond the rutted side road. Through the tangle of trees and rampant underbrush I could see the parked van hidden from sight amidst the sheltering shadows ahead. Beyond it, spanning the river, was a crude and ancient wooden foot bridge, the narrow and rotting relic of a bygone era.

I slipped out of the car, circling to the other side, then opened the passenger door and collared my captive.

"Where are they?" I whispered.

"On the other side." Bobo's voice was faint but the apprehension it held was strong. "Please don't make me take you there!"

"Shut up and come with me." I jerked him forward toward the trees, then halted as I stared across the rickety old makeshift bridge. The purpose it served in the past was long forgotten, and so was the huge oval on the far bank which opened close to the water's edge.

But Le Boss had not forgotten. Once this great circular conduit was part of the earliest Paris sewer-system. Deep within its depths, dozens of connecting branches converged into a gigantic single outlet and spewed their waste into the water below. Now the interior channels had been sealed off, leaving the main tunnel dry but not deserted. For it was here, within a circle of metal perhaps twenty feet in diameter, that Le Boss found shelter from prying eyes, past the unused dirt road and the abandoned bridge.

The huge opening gaped like the mouth of Hell, and from within the fires of Hell blazed forth.

Actually the fires were merely the product of candle light flickering from tapers set in niches around the base of the tunnel. I sensed that their value was not only practical but precautionary, for they would be quickly extinguished in the event of an alarm.

Alarm?

I tugged at Bobo's soiled collar. "The lookout," I murmured. "Where is he?"

Reluctantly the boy stabbed a finger in the direction of a tall and tangled weed bordering the side of the bridge. In the shadows I made out a small shape huddled amid surrounding clumps of vegetation.

"Sandor." My captive nodded. "He's asleep."

I glanced up. "What about Le Boss and the others?"

"Inside the sewer. Further back, where nobody can see them."

"Good. You will go in now."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone." As I spoke I took out my key and unlocked the handcuffs, but my grip on Bobo's neck did not loosen.

He rubbed his chafed wrists. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell Le Boss that I grabbed you on the street, but you broke free and ran."

"How do I say I got here?"

"Perhaps you hitched a ride."

"And then—"

"You didn't know I was following you, not until I caught you here again. Tell him I'm waiting on this side of the river until you bring me my key. Once I get it I will go away—no questions asked, no harm done."

Bobo frowned. "Suppose he doesn't have the key?"

"He will," I said. "You see, it's just an old brass gate-key, but the handle is shaped into my family crest. Mounted in the crest is a large ruby."

Bobo's frown persisted. "What if he just pried it loose and threw the key away?"

"That's possible." I shrugged. "But you had better pray he didn't." My fingers dug into his neck. "I want that key, understand? And I want it now."

"He's not going to give it to you, not Le Boss! Why should he?"

For answer I dragged him toward the sleeping sentry in the weeds. Reaching into my jacket I produced a knife. As Bobo gaped in surprise, I aimed a kick at the slumbering lookout. He blinked and sat up quickly, then froze as I pressed the tip of the broad blade against his neck.

"Tell him that if you don't bring me back the key in five minutes I'll cut Sandor's throat."

Sandor believed me, I know, because he started to whimper. And Bobo believed me too, for when I released my grip on his collar he started running toward the bridge.

Now there was only one question. Would Le Boss believe me?

I sincerely hoped so. But for the moment all I could do was be patient. Yanking the snivelling Sandor to his feet, I tugged him along to position myself at the edge of the bridge, staring across it as Bobo reached the mouth of the sewer on the other side. The mouth swallowed him; I stood waiting.

Except for the rasp of Sandor's hoarse breathing, the night was still. No sound emanated from the great oval of the sewer across the river, and my vision could not penetrate the flashing of flame from within.

But the reflection of the light served me as I studied my prisoner. Like Bobo, he had the body of a child, but the face peering up at me was incongruously aged—not by wrinkles but by the grim set of his cracked lips, the gaunt hollows beneath protruding cheekbones, and the sunken circles outlining the eyes

above. The eyes were old, those deep dark eyes that had witnessed far more than any child should see. In them I read a present submissiveness, but that was merely surface reaction. Beyond it lay a cold cunning, a cruel craftiness governed not by intelligence but by animal instinct, fully developed, ready for release. And he was an animal, I told myself; a predator, dwelling in a cave, issuing forth to satisfy ageless atavistic hungers.

He hadn't been born that way, of course. It was Le Boss who transformed the innocence of childhood into amoral impulse, who eradicated humanity and brought forth the beast beneath.

Le Boss. What was he doing now? Surely Bobo had reached him by this time, told his tale. What was happening? I held Sandor close at knife-point, my eyes searching the swirl of firelight and shadow deep in the tunnel's iron maw.

Then, suddenly and shockingly, the metal mouth screamed.

The high, piercing echo rose only for an instant before fading into silence, but I knew its source.

Tightening my grip on Sandor's ragged collar and pressing the knife blade close to his throat, I started toward the foot bridge.

"No!" he quavered. "Don't—"

I ignored his panting plea, his futile efforts to free himself. Thrusting him forward, I crossed the swaying structure, averting my gaze from the dank depths beneath and focusing vision and purpose on the opening ahead.

Passing between the flame-tipped teeth of the candles on either side, I dragged Sandor down into the sewer's yawning throat. I was conscious of the odor now, the odor of carrion corruption which welled from the dark inner recesses, conscious of the clang of our footsteps against the rounded metal surface, but my attention was directed elsewhere.

A dark bundle of rags lay across the curved base of the tunnel. Skirting it as we approached, I saw I'd been mistaken. The rags were merely a covering, outlining the twisted form beneath.

Bobo had made a mistake too, for it was his body that sprawled motionless there. The grotesque angle of his neck and the splinter of bone protruding from an outflung arm indicated that he had fallen from above. Fallen, or perhaps been hurled.

My eyes sought the rounded ceiling of the sewer. It was, as I'd estimated, easily twenty feet high, but I didn't have to scan the top to confirm my guess as to Bobo's fate.

Just ahead, at the left of the rounded iron wall, was a wooden

ladder propped against the side of a long, broad shelf mounted on makeshift scaffolding which rose perhaps a dozen feet from the sewer's base. Here the candles were affixed to poles at regular intervals, illuminating a vast humbled heap of handluggage, ruckshacks, attache cases, boxes, packages, purses, and moldy, mildewed articles of clothing, piled into a thieves' mountain of stolen goods.

And here, squatting before them on a soiled and aging mattress, amid a litter of emptied and discarded bottles, Le Boss squatted.

There was no doubt as to his identity; I recognized him by his mocking smile, the cool casualness with which he rose to confront me after I'd forced Sandor up the ladder and onto the platform.

The man who stood swaying before us was a monster. Forgive the term, but there is no other single word to describe him. Le Boss was well over six feet tall, and the legs enclosed in the dirt-smudged trousers of his soiled suit were bowed and bent by the sheer immensity of the burden they bore. He must have weighed over three hundred pounds, and the fat bulging from his bloated belly and torso was almost obscene in its abundance. His huge hands terminated in fingers as thick as sausages.

There was no shirt beneath the tightly-stretched suit jacket and from a cord around his thick neck a whistle dangled against the naked chest. His head was bullet-shaped and bald. Indeed, he was completely hairless—no hint of eyebrows surmounted the hyperthyroid pupils, no lashes guarded the red-rimmed sockets. The porcine cheeks and sagging jowls were beardless, their fleshy folds worm-white even in the candle light which glittered against the tiny, tawny eyes.

I needed no second glance to confirm my suspicions of what had occurred before my arrival here; the scene I pictured in my mind was perfectly clear. The coming of Bobo, the breathless, stammered story, his master's reaction of mingled disbelief and anger, the fit of drunken fury in which the terrified bringer of bad tidings had been flung over the side of the platform to smash like an empty bottle on the floor of the sewer below—I saw it all too vividly.

Le Boss grinned at me, his fleshy lips parted to reveal yellowed stumps of rotting teeth.

"Well, old man?" he spoke in French, but his voice was oddly

accented; he could indeed be a yougoslave.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. "You know why I'm here," I said.

He nodded. "Something about a key, I take it."

"Your pack of thieves took it. But it's my property."

His grin broadened. "My property now." The deep voice rumbled with mocking relish. "Suppose I'm not inclined to return it?"

For answer I shoved Sandor before me and raised the knife, poising it against his neck. My captive trembled and made mewing sounds as the blade pressed closer.

Le Boss shrugged. "You'll have to do better than that, old man. A child's life isn't important to me."

I peered down at Bobo's body lying below. "So I see." Striving to conceal my reaction, I faced him again. "But where are the others?"

"Playing, I imagine."

"Playing?"

"You find that strange, old man? In spite of what you may think, I'm not without compassion. After all, they are only children. They work hard, and they deserve the reward of play."

Le Boss turned, gesturing down toward the far recesses of the sewer. My eyes followed his gaze through the shifting candle glow, and for the first time I became aware of movement in the dim depths. Faint noises echoed upward, identifiable now as the sound of childish laughter. Tiny shapes moved below and beyond, shapes which gleamed white amid the shadows.

The yougoslaves were naked, and at play. I counted four of them, scuffling and squatting in the far reaches of the tunnel.

But wait! There was a fifth figure, slightly smaller than the others who loomed over it and laughed as they pawed the squirming shape or tugged at the golden hair. Over their mirth rose the sound of sobbing, and over that, the echo of Bobo's voice.

Hey, old man—you like girls? Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—

Now I could see only too clearly. Two of the boys held their victim down, spread-eagled and helpless, while the other two—but I shall not describe what they were doing.

Glancing away, I again met Le Boss's smile. Somehow it seemed more hideous to me than the sight below.

He groped for a bottle propped against the pile of loot beside him and drank before speaking. "You are distressed, eh?"

I shook my head. "Not as much as you'll be unless you give me back my key."

He smiled. "Empty threats will get you nothing but empty hands."

"My hands aren't empty." I jabbed the knife at Sandor's neck, grazing the flesh, and he squealed in terror.

Le Boss shrugged. "Go ahead. I told you it doesn't matter to me."

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then, with a sigh I drew the knife back from Sandor's throat and released my hold on his sweat-soaked collar. He turned and raced off to the ladder behind me, and I could hear his feet scraping against the rungs as he descended. Mercifully, the sound muffled the laughter from below.

Le Boss nodded. "That's better. Now we can discuss the situation like gentlemen."

I lifted the knife. "Not as long as I have this, and you have the key."

"More empty threats?"

"My knife speaks for me." I took a step forward as I spoke.

He chuckled. "I swear I don't know what to make of you, old man. Either you are very stupid or very brave."

"Both, perhaps." I raised the blade higher, but he halted my advance with a quick gesture.

"Enough," he wheezed. Turning, he stopped and thrust his pudgy hand into a tangle of scarves, kerchiefs, and handbags behind him. When he straightened again he was holding the key.

"Is this what you're after?"

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't discard it."

He stared at the red stone gleaming dully from the crested handle. "I never toss away valuables."

"Just human lives," I said.

"Don't preach to me, old man. I'm not interested in your philosophy."

"Nor I in yours." I stretched out my hand, palm upward. "All I want is my key."

His own hand drew back. "Not so fast. Suppose you tell me why."

"It's not the ruby," I answered. "Go ahead, pry it loose if you like."

Le Boss chuckled again. "A poor specimen—big enough, but flawed. It's the key itself that interests you, eh?"

"Naturally. As I told Bobo, it opens the gate to my estate."

"And just where is this estate of yours?"

"Near Bourg-la-Reine."

"That's not too far away." The little eyes narrowed. "The van could take us there within the hour."

"It would serve no purpose," I said. "Perhaps 'estate' is a misnomer. The place is small and holds nothing you'd be interested in. The furnishings are old, but hardly the quality of antiques. The house itself has been boarded up for years since my last visit. I have other properties elsewhere on the continent where I spend much of my time. But since I'll be here for several weeks on business, I prefer familiar surroundings."

"Other properties, eh?" Le Boss fingered the key. "You must be quite rich, old man."

"That's none of your affair."

"Perhaps not, but I was just thinking. If you have money, why not conduct your business in comfort from a hotel in Paris?"

I shrugged. "It's a matter of sentiment—"

"Really?" he eyed me sharply, and in the interval before speaking, I noted that the sounds below had ceased.

My voice broke the sudden silence. "I assure you—"

"*Au contraire*. You do not assure me in the least." Le Boss scowled. "If you do own an estate, then it's the key to the house that's important, not the one for the gate. Any locksmith could open it for you without the need of this particular key."

He squinted at the burnished brass, the dulled brilliance of the ruby imbedded in the ornate crest. "Unless, of course, it isn't a gate key after all. Looks to me more like the key to a strong-box, or even a room in the house holding hidden valuables."

"It's just a gate key." Again I held one hand out as the other gripped the knife. "But I want it—now."

"Enough to kill?" he challenged.

"If necessary."

"I'll spare you that." Grinning, Le Boss reached down again into a bundle of discarded clothing. When he turned to face me against he held a revolver in his hand.

"Drop that toothpick," he said, raising the weapon to reinforce his command.

Sighing, I released my grip and the knife fell, clattering over the side of the open platform to the surface of the sewer below.

Impelled by blind impulse, I turned hastily. If I could get to

the ladder—

"Stand where you are!"

It wasn't his words, but the sharp clicking sound that halted me. Slowly I pivoted to face the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

"That's better," he said.

"You wouldn't murder me—not in cold blood."

"Let's leave it up to the kids." As Le Boss spoke his free hand fumbled for the whistle looped around his neck. Enfolding it in blubbery lips, he blew.

The piercing blast echoed, reverberating from the rounded iron walls beside me and below. Then came the answering murmurs, the sudden thud of footsteps. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced down and saw the four naked figures—no, there were five now, including the fully clothed Sandor—moving toward the platform on which we stood.

Again I conjured up a vision of Hell, of demons dancing in the flames. But the flames were merely candle light and the bodies hurrying beneath were those of children. It was only their laughter which was demonic. Their laughter, and their gleefully contorted faces.

As they approached I caught a glimpse of what they held in their hands. Sandor had scooped up the knife from where it had fallen and the others held weapons of their own—a mallet, a wooden club, a length of steel pipe, the serrated stump of a broken wine bottle.

Le Boss chuckled once more. "Playtime," he said.

"Call them off!" I shouted. "I warn you—"

He shook his head. "No way, old man."

Old man. That, I swear, is what did it. Not the menace of the gun, not the sight of the loathsome little creatures below. It was just the phrase, the contempt with which it had been repeated over and over again.

I knew what he was thinking—an unarmed, helpless elderly victim had been trapped for torment. And for the most part he was right. I was weaponless, old, trapped.

But not helpless.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated. There are subsonic whistles which make no audible sound, and there are ways of summoning which require no whistles at all. And there's more than human vermin infesting abandoned sewers, lurking in the far recesses of tangled tunnels, but responsive to certain commands.

Almost instantly that response came.

It came in the form of a purposeful padding, of faint noises magnified by sheer numbers. It came in the sound of squeaks and chittering, first as distant echoes, then in closer cacophony as my summons were answered.

Now the yougoslaves had reached the ladder at the far side of the platform. I saw Sandor mount the lower rungs, knife held between clenched teeth—saw him halt as he too heard the sudden, telltale tumult. Behind Sandor his companions turned to seek its source.

They cried out then, first in surprise, then in alarm, as the grey wave surged toward them along the sewer's length; the grey wave, flecked with hundreds of red and glaring eyes, a thousand tiny teeth.

The wave raced forward, curling around the feet and ankles of the yougoslaves before the ladder, climbing and clinging to their legs and knees. Screaming, they lashed out with their weapons, trying to beat back the attack but the wave poured on, forward and upward. Furry forms leaped higher, claws digging into waists, teeth biting into bellies. Sandor pulled himself up the ladder with both hands, but below him the red eyes rose and the grey shapes launched up from behind to cover his unprotected back with a blanket of wriggling bodies.

Now the screams from below were drowned out by the volume of shrill screeching. The knife dropped from between Sandor's lips as he shrieked and toppled down into the writhing mass that had already engulfed his companions. Flailing helplessly, their faces sank from sight in the rising waves of the grey sea.

It happened so quickly that Le Boss, caught by surprise, could only stare in stunned silence at the shambles below.

It was I whose voice rose above the bedlam. "The key," I cried. "Give me the key."

For answer he raised his hand—not the one holding the key, but the one grasping the gun.

His fingers were trembling, and the muzzle wavered as I started toward him. Even so, at such close range I realized he couldn't miss. And he didn't.

As he squeezed the trigger the shots came in rapid succession. They were barely audible in the uproar from the tunnel, but I felt their impact as they struck my chest and torso.

I kept on, moving closer, hearing the final, futile click as he

continued to press the trigger of his emptied revolver. Looking up, eyes red with rage, he hurled the weapon at my head. It whizzed past me, and now he had nothing left to clutch but the key. His hands started to shake.

My hand went out.

Snatching the key from his pudgy paw, I stared at his frantic face. Perhaps I should have told him he'd guessed correctly, the key was not meant to open a gate. I could have explained the ruby in the crest—the symbol of a lineage so ancient that it still adhered to the old custom of maintaining a tomb on the estate. The key gave me access to that tomb, not that it was really needed; my branch of the line had other resting places, and during my travels I always carried with me what was necessary to afford temporary rest of my own. But during my stay here the tomb was both practical and private. Calling a locksmith would be unwise and inconvenient, and I do not relish inconvenience.

All this I could have told him, and much more. Instead I pocketed the key bearing the great flawed ruby that was like a single drop of blood.

As I did so, I realized that the squeals and chittering below had faded into other sounds compounded of claws ripping through cloth, teeth grating against bone.

Unable to speak, unable to move, Le Boss awaited my approach. When I gripped his shoulders he must have fainted, for there was only a dead weight now to ease down onto the platform floor.

Below me my brothers sated their hunger, feasting on the bodies of the youngoslaves.

Bending forward to the fat neck beneath me, in my own way I feasted too.

What fools they were, these creatures who thought themselves so clever! Perhaps they could outwit others, but their little tricks could not prevail against me. After all, they were only youngoslaves.

And I am a Transylvanian.

Coming of Age at Apple Creek

by THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)

When he touched her in the nighttime dark her skin became cold and she pulled away. "You're jealous?" he said wonderingly. She turned. "Of an old hag in the moonlight...?"

Efton saw the old woman four times: three when he was thirty-three, once twenty-one years later. He never understood anything about her, but Efton was a simple man who found it easier to accept than to question.

The first time was in the spring of the year Florina drowned.

They had been married eight months, and Efton was hoping for a child. Florina never said she did not want one, but she made it clear she did not wish to become misshapen. From the beginning she would leave their bed and go down the hill to the creek after they had made love. The spring, thick with watercress and cold as melting snow, washed her clean of him and his seed.

That night, from the window in the kitchen, he watched Florina drop her gown and step into the water aglint with moonlight and dappled with apple blossoms shed by the old tree, its fruit too knurled and sour to make sauce or cider, that grew at the spring's edge. He found the sight so beautiful that he tried to hold it on the canvas of his mind, but the towel that blotted the cold water on Florina's skin seemed to soak up the image.

The towel hung like a flag on a windless day, and Florina spoke beside him. "Who is she? What is she doing? Why are you watching her?"

The woman using the towel turned to face the kitchen window, and he saw, with a thrill as cold as water of the spring,

she was old and wrinkled and flaky of skin. She smiled toothlessly, and he dropped the glass he was holding.

As the water splashed over their feet, they moved away from each other. When they looked up, the woman was gone. Moonlight touched the water of the spring and illuminated the creek where it crossed the road stretching away empty from both banks.

"Where did she go?" Florina demanded. "Who is she?"

"She couldn't go anywhere. I think she was a shadow in the moonlight," Efton said. "We imagined her." But he knew *he* had not. He knew *he* had seen her.

"We imagined the same thing?" Florina's voice cut through his pain. He did not know why he was hurting, but the woman at the spring had become a stricture in his mind, his heart, and his land. And now the edge of Florina's words slashed at his love. For a minute, he wanted to strike out, to hit Florina. Then, ashamed, he said wonderingly, "You're jealous?"

"Of an old hag in the moonlight? Of course I'm not jealous. I'm disgusted that she could arouse you so soon after ..." She turned and walked quickly into the bedroom.

He stayed to blot the water on the floor with the towel Florina had dropped. And, when he followed Florina to bed and attempted to kiss the nape of her neck, to put his arm across her waist, she moved toward the wall with a quiet, "No," her skin as cold as the spring beneath his hand. Gratefully, he turned away and, for the first time in their marriage, went to sleep with his back to her.

The next morning as he went to let the cows into the feed lot, he detoured to pass the spring. He saw nothing unusual, but, as he looked back toward the house, he could see Florina watching him from the kitchen window.

A chill lay on their lives from that night. They worked together as effortlessly as before, pleased when the cows calved easily and with an abnormally high incidence of twins, pleased with the inordinately large number of heifers, the few bullocks. Life promised new sweetness as the alfalfa scented the night air and even the old tree at the creek set a bumper crop of smooth, unblemished fruit. The distance between them in the bed remained great, however, lessening periodically when, in her need, Florina became aggressive and reached across the gulf. When he touched her in the nighttime dark, her skin became cold and she pulled away until the wall stopped her. The only time he pursued her

across that distance, she hissed into the darkness, "Are you seeing her?" and he knew what she meant. Retreating to the edge of the bed, he waited until Florina was asleep, stepped into his shoes and, naked and white in the moonlight, walked down the hill to the spring.

The water was as cold to his hand as Florina's voice to his need, so he sat on the bank and watched the long night pass, the dawn lighten the sky, and the cows come to the feed lot for morning milking. When he came into the kitchen, he could smell Florina's anger, but she lay in the bedroom, facing the wall, breathing shallowly.

Three of the heifers died that day and hailstones from a cloudless sky knocked most of the young apples from the tree. In a week, nine more heifers had died and the cloying sweetness of rotting fruit hung miasmicly over the hollow where the creek crossed the road. Efton looked helplessly at Florina, but he could think of nothing to say. She merely smiled bitterly and touched his wrist with her cool fingers. They had no words for daylight hours, and the memory of her question precluded nighttime talk.

On the second Saturday in July, the square was crowded with trucks when Efton pulled into a parking spot near the side door of the courthouse. Florina took her egg basket from the truckbed and said, "I'll meet you at the IGA at two." He watched her willowy hips as she went away from him, and the cold pain in his chest made him shiver in the ninety-five degree heat. Cicadas measured the temperature from the elms shading the square, and friends moved slowly from group to group relaying community news and commenting on crops and weather.

Efton joyed in the sense of belonging to, of being a part of the timeless currents of the town. He envied neighbors who joshed their wives companionably and threatened their children ritually, but he did not think how it would be to trade places with them. Standing in front of the grocery store as the courthouse clock started to sound the hour, Efton looked toward the feed store for Florina. She was just coming out of the doorway and turning toward him when he saw the old woman of the creek four or five paces in front of Florina. Shade from the great elms made the street dim except in the sun pools through which the old woman and Florina seemed to wade in slow motion. He watched them near, the old woman come abreast of him, Florina almost quicken her step to close the gap.

And then the old woman spoke. "It isn't too late—ever," she said in a dry, flaky voice.

As she passed on, Florina's voice cut coldly through the heat. "Efton," she said.

He turned to her, amazed at the anger in her voice, the hate on her face.

"What does she mean?" Florina demanded, looking into his mind. "What does she want?"

"I don't know," he said helplessly. Then, turning back to his right, he said, "Ma'am, what . . ." But the woman was gone. The cooling shade and shifting sun pools were empty of people for at least twenty feet.

And Florina was at his side. "Where did she go? What did she mean?"

"I don't know," Efton said. "I don't think she went anywhere. I don't think she meant anything."

"Then where is she?" Florina demanded. "What is there between you?"

He looked at Florina's twisted face. The beautiful mask, the features he had loved to adore were a turgor of jealousy, a fritillary of hate.

And he could not answer her questions. He did not understand them.

Nor did he understand Florina's silence during the empty days and nights that were to follow. As the heat of summer burned the fields and forced the birds to silence in the afternoon, Florina spent more and more time in the bedroom, a cold cloth across her eyes, anger in her breathing. He tried to ask questions, to initiate love, but she withdrew further and further into her silence.

When the chickens stopped laying and the roosters began to die, Florina said, "Love has gone from this place. Nothing *can* live where trust has died."

"My love has not gone," Efton said. He did not know what she meant about trust dying.

"My trust has died," she said. She was cleaning the lamp; and the smell of coal oil filled the kitchen. As she polished the globe with crumpled newspaper, she was looking down the hill to the spring. He sat at the table, watching her back and wondering what he had done—or not done. Evening shadows were edging into the room as bells tinkled from the lower pasture, indicating the cattle were settling in for the gentle sleep that allows their udders to

swell to sweet bursting for the morning milking.

Suddenly Florina stiffened; the globe slipped from her hand and fell to the bleached grey boards of the floor. The thin glass rang like a distant cowbell and shattered in a high tinkling rain as shards skittered across the floor to glance off Efton's shoes. With a muffled cry, she stepped back from the sink and, turning, brought her bare foot down on the sharp splinters.

Before she could fall, Efton was at her side, supporting her weight, holding her wrists by simple reflex action, for she had raised her hands as if to strike his chest. "She waits," Florina hissed.

He knew what she meant, who waited. Pulling Florina's rigid body to him, Efton released her wrists and pinioned her as, her back to the sink, he looked across her shoulder to the spring.

A gibbous moon shone dimly in the early dark, glinting on the water and touching the gnarled fruit of the tortured tree, the humped back of the old woman as she stepped from her dress and slipped into the spring. Almost at the same moment, Florina slipped from his grasp and turned to stare down the hill, her back arched away from him, almost as humped as the old woman's.

A vagrant cloud drifted across the moon, lingered a moment before passing on. Like dancers in a silent pas de deux, Efton pulled Florina back against his chest, reached around her shoulders to grasp her wrists again where she had crossed her hands over her breasts.

And the cloud passed from the moon.

"Aah," Florina gasped, all resistance gone out of her as she leaned against the supportive chest behind her.

The cold light seemed caught for an instant in the branches of the tree, an illusion that changed its glow to a cloud of blossoms so perfect, so massed that Efton thought he could smell their sweet fragrance. Then, releasing the drifting petals, it shimmered onto the emerging form of the woman. The magic that had moved Florina to cry out touched and held, flowed from her to Efton. He too saw the metamorphosed woman, a beautiful, young, hauntingly familiar figure.

Florina twisted from Efton's grasp and ran, scattering the tinkling glass in all directions, into the bedroom.

Efton stared from the spring to the bedroom, then back. Sweeping out the door, he leaped from the porch, hurdled the fence and ran down the road, slipping and sliding on the rocks

skittering away under his feet. At the creek, he turned to run up its bank, the hard, dried apples rolling beneath his feet, threatening to throw him down. He stood at the spring where water glistened in the pale light on the grass and twinkled on the comb dropped by the woman, its tortoise shell holding brilliants. Efton scooped it up and, looking dazedly around the pasture, carried it back up the hill to the house.

Florina lay across the bed, her feet dripping blood onto the floor. Efton sat beside her and, scarcely knowing what to do or what he was doing, offered her the comb. "You dropped it at the spring," he said miserably.

In the bright moonlight, her face twisted into a mask of fear. With one fluid motion, she raised herself on one hand, swung the other in a wide arc and knocked the comb from his hand into the dark shadows across the room. "It isn't mine," she screamed. "It isn't mine!" Then, raining blows wildly on his shoulder, his face, she pleaded, "Get out. Leave me alone."

Confused, angry, hurt, Efton went into the parlor, a musty, closed up room used only for weddings and wakes, its horsehair sofa a scratchy length designed to discourage undue comfort. He spent the long night on the floor, a small patchwork pillow made of dress scraps supporting his sleepless head.

Before first light, he went into the kitchen and out the back door without going into the bedroom. He would do the milking by himself, letting Florina sleep.

The cows were gentle and anxious to release the rich fullness of their udders as they had been in the weeks before the old woman first appeared. The familiar routines of stanchioning the cattle, stripping the ivory milk into the pails settled his confusion, restored his trust in the power of daylight. After he had finished milking and turned the cattle out to pasture, he walked into the kitchen, satisfied Florina would be up and apologetic about not helping with the chores but setting a bountiful table to make up for her strange behavior.

She was not in the kitchen. Nor had she been. The broken chimney lay scattered about the room; blood made a dried trail to the bedroom door. Nor was Florina in the bedroom. The bed was rumpled where she had thrown herself across it, where Efton had sat before she banished him to the parlor, but she had not turned back the covers, had not used a pillow.

The throw pillow he had used was still on the floor in the

parlor, but there was no indication she had been in that room either. Then Efton noticed the front door ajar, the screen unhooked. Feeling faintly ill, he stepped onto the front stoop and looked down the hill to the spring. Half-submerged, something floated there, buoyed by the thick watercress.

With a "No!" that echoed from the low hills, Efton slipped and slid down the road as he had last night, but this time the body was in the spring. It was Florina. She floated face down among the warty apples caught in the watercress. As he pulled her from the cold water and sat with her body across his legs, he marvelled at the young, unblemished face, as reposed and sweet in death as it had looked last night when she emerged from the spring, the apple blossoms framing her ripe body.

Efton buried her on the bank of the creek, beneath the apple tree already so tormented and twisted that this new pain could not damage it further. When neighbors asked why he had not buried her in the family plot at Langston, Efton merely shrugged, remembering Florina by moonlight among the apple blossoms.

As the dying suns touched the bank of the creek that fall and waning moons blushed the snows by the spring that winter, Efton remembered the flower-scented nights of May, the alfalfa days of summer; and the pain of his loss became less with their passing.

Then it was spring again and the old apple tree put out new twigs, strong and burgeoning with promise. He would have stayed their growth, for he dreaded the ugly fruit that would form from their beauty, but he was a farmer and the land was his life. As the cows calved, renewing the herd, and the meadows bloomed, pledging their part in the cycle of hope, Efton waited alone on the hill.

The days flowed away like the gentle waters of the creek, whispering memory in the shallows and eddying at the spring. Swallows cleared the evening skies of insects, and poorwills called in the night. Suns burned off the mists, and noon ripened the grain. Life was a legend retold in the time made of rhythms and rings and full circles.

While Efton did not question why he was not happy, he also did not question why he was content. He did often sit on the creek bank at the spring and turn the globed apples, plump and juicy and sweet, over wonderingly in his hand. Sometimes he would let one bob in the spring until it was chilled and then, savoring the sharp snap as his teeth bit through the skin, fondle

the sweet meat with his tongue and recall the clean odors of Florina's skin after she had bathed in the spring. And his memories were enough to keep him from being too lonely.

A few years after Florina's death, the banker asked Efton if he had considered remarrying. He had become a wealthy man, the farm almost running itself and producing bumper crops of everything from dairy products and grain to great truckloads of apples from the one old tree at the spring. "You will want a son to leave all of this to," the banker said, waving at the ledger sheet bearing Efton's name.

"If that should be so," Efton said carelessly, "the land will produce him." And he did nothing to change the routine of his days.

Once in a while he hired one of the neighboring women to give the house a good cleaning, to wash the curtains and air the bed. He had looked for the comb set with brilliants after Florina was buried, but it was not to be found. He thought it would turn up in some cranny or crevice each time a different woman ministered to the needs of the house, but it did not. In time, he quit wondering—even about that.

And so, lost in the changing seasons, loving the land that so filled his needs, Efton knew the years were passing, but he did not mark their going or regret the changes they brought. He did not even remember the date of Florina's drowning, for he could not grieve that which had not gone from the land, that which he had not lost.

Then, one late summer evening as the swallows were relinquishing the sweet air to the poorwills, Efton felt the strange stirrings he had known so many seasons ago, the urges of blood in his pips. In the gathering dark, he moved through the kitchen and passed through the parlor, remembering needs. He picked up the pillow that lay on the floor. He stood in the bedroom now lit by the moon. His foot felt a coldness, his eye saw a glint. He stooped and he picked up the comb. Fritillared honey and amber and brown swirled soft round the brilliants that glittered and gleamed in the fires of the moon of his youth.

On into the kitchen, he paused at the sink. The glass on the floor crunched under his shoes. The pungence of coal oil hung in the air as he stood, and he waited, then opened his eyes and saw what he knew he would see.

The moon in its passing illumined the hill, re-touching, re-shading, re-shaping each hour that had passed. It brightened the

landscape, enlightened the mind, it lay on the lift of the creek and the spring. It gleamed on the flesh of the woman.

She stood in the spring, and the cup of her hand lifted its water and poured it across the slope of her shoulder, the mound of her breasts. Then she moved to the bank and stepped onto the grass that glistened and gleamed as the water dropped down and beaded the blades at her feet.

Like one who has wakened to finish his dream, Efton passed through the kitchen and onto the porch. Down the hill his feet knew through the soles of his shoes, he flowed like the moonlight and water.

As he stood then before her, she lifted her head and held out the towel and turned till her back, all beaded with water and cool to his touch, invited the warmth of his hands. Like clay of the potter, she turned in his hands and smiled in the light and the flowers of the tree.

He offered the comb. "You dropped it," he said.

As she took it, she smiled prettily.

On the bank of the creek, at the edge of the spring, Efton watched as Florina slowly combed her long hair. Then she coiled it and anchored it fast with the comb, and she offered the nape of her neck to his lips.

As the chill of the water, the pepper of cress, the sweet juice of apples came into his mouth, Efton moved with Florina back into the spring feeding into the creek feeding into the land and forever.

The Light at the End

by JOHN SKIPP and CRAIG SPECTOR

Evita's eyes became blackened pits;
blood rolled from the corners of her mouth.
Rudy scowled at his handiwork.

An excerpt from the major Bantam novel
due out in paperback next month.

EIGHT DIE ON TERROR TRAIN

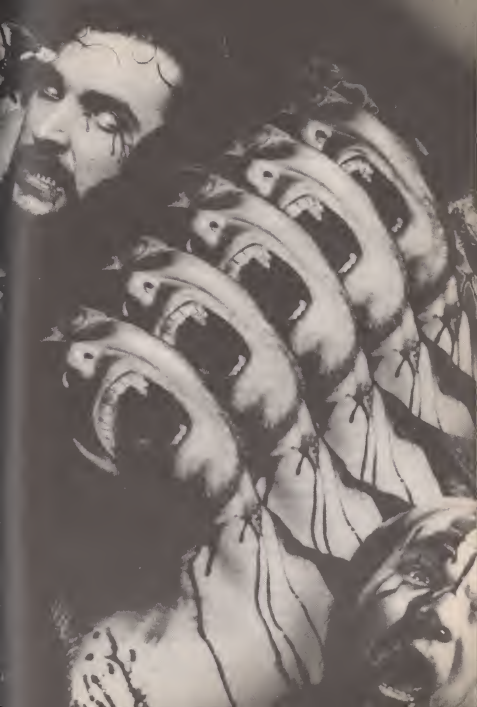
SUBWAY RIDE THROUGH HELL LEAVES NO MOTIVES, NO CLUES

Police today are at a loss to explain the deaths of eight people found slaughtered on a downtown RR train this morning. Nor can they explain why the victims—five youths, a transit patrolman, the motorman, and one unidentified man who appears to have been eaten by rats—all died in such horribly different ways.

And the lone survivor—the conductor of the train, whom TA spokesman Bernard Shanks declined to identify—has been hospitalized for “complete psychological collapse.” The man, who was taken from the scene of horror at 5:17 this morning, is not currently regarded as a suspect.

A police spokesman stated that “We are still looking for a motive in what is certainly the most bizarre, horrible tragedy in recent memory....”

Way at the front of the downtown platform, Rudy Pasko was defacing subway posters. *Evita's eyes became blackened pits. Blood rolled from the corners of her mouth in bold streaks of*



magic marker. The microphone stand had been turned into an enormous penis. And, in large jagged letters on either side, Rudy wrote:

SHE EATS THE POOR
AND MAKES SHELLS OUT OF HER LOVERS

There was no joy in it. Rudy scowled at his handiwork for a moment, then moved down to see what he could do with Perdue's Prime Parts. A cigarette dangled from the arrogant slash of his mouth. His eyes were dark, set back with mascara in the pale, bony face. There was an unpleasant tic around the right socket: too much speed, too much pent-up rage and despair. His hair was a bleached-blond rockabilly pompadour. He was dressed entirely in black: tight jeans, artfully-ripped sweatshirt, spiked wristbands, leather boots.

Rudy harbored no sugary illusions of love. Only nasty ones. Which was why he had the terrible fight with Josalyn. Which was why she threw him out of her apartment. Which was why he woke up his so-called best friend Stephen in the middle of the night, threatening suicide or murder or worse. Which was why he waited, alone, for the RR train to come, while Steve the Sap was no doubt putting some coffee on the burner.

Curiously, now that he *was* alone, Rudy's mind was almost completely silent. He stared at the twins in the poster, Smilin' Frank Perdue and this enormous fucking sheep, and cracked up. The fight was forgotten. He thought only of those two ridiculous mammals, and how to enhance their appearance.

Rudy was applying a business suit to the sheep's likeness when the dark train rumbled into 23rd Street with a ratlike squealing of brakes. He shrugged, beyond caring, and quickly added a pinstripe tie. "A masterpiece," he proudly proclaimed.

The dark train ground to a halt and glared at him with its two blank eyes. Rudy took a last drag of his cigarette and chucked it onto the tracks. He leered at the man in the driver's seat, slipped him the finger.

The man leered horribly back.

The doors opened, and Rudy noticed that there were no lights on the train. Then a very bad rush hit him with alarming force, and he staggered back a bit, puzzled.

It's nothing, he told himself. *It's nothing. Let's go.*

He moved toward the open door, and the hair started to prickle on his arms. Rudy felt himself tightening up involuntarily,

but he didn't know why. His steps grew suddenly timorous, uncertain, and then the second rush hit him like a fist to the belly.

"Jesus!" he doubled up slightly and stopped, just staring at the blackness inside the car. *What's happening?* his mind wanted to know. He hung there, frozen.

The doors started to close.

Purely by reflex, Rudy jumped forward and grabbed for the opening. The doors flew open at his touch, and he hustled inside.

The doors closed.

Rudy watched them, panting. He pressed his face to the glass, took a last look at the Perdue twins. Suddenly, they weren't very funny anymore.

Something moved behind him, and he turned.

The dark shape stood in the middle of the aisle, winking at him with luminous eyes. *"How do you do,"* it whispered, and light sparkled on the long sharp teeth.

As the dark train resumed its terrible, downward roll.

In the tunnels . . .

The old Number 6 train rumbled away from the light of Union Square Station, dragging itself painfully into the darkness uptown. The usual number of passengers were on board, doing their mid-night ride; atrocity tends to attract as many people as it scares away. Much to the disappointment of morbid thrill-seekers, nothing spectacular was going to happen to them. They would get where they were going, and that would be that.

A few of the more astute commuters would notice the abandoned station, smothered in darkness, that hung to either side of them as they rolled down the tracks between. If they were quick, or particularly observant, they'd notice the signs on the walls: EIGHTEENTH STREET, bold-lettered in white against the long black rectangles. They'd notice the debris on the platforms, the general state of disrepair, the fact that nobody'd made a habit of getting on or off there for a long, long time.

They wouldn't notice the figure that lay sprawled in the corner of the uptown platform, surrounded by rusting trash receptacles. They wouldn't see it writhing in the grip of a nightmare, twitching like a man on a gas chamber floor. They wouldn't see the rats that were gathered around it, caught between hunger and an almost-religious awe.

They wouldn't know that it dreamed:

Twenty rats, in a tight semicircle around the mouth of the niche. Tiny eyes, glittering in the dim light from the tunnel walls, twitching like a single wounded organism, moved by some impulse more basic than thought, as they watched.

The two great rats, facing off in the niche: the first one, grey, bloated, monstrosly scarred; the second smaller, leaner, entirely black. Sharp yellow teeth bared. Eyes glaring red. Fur standing up straight along their spines as they circled each other, making tiny-throated bloodhunger sounds.

The grey one moved first, lunging forward suddenly to lash out with powerful jaws. The second one ducked, crouching lower, driving up with its snout. Tasting of the flesh beneath the chin.

Then rolling, the both of them, a ball of thrashing raw meat motion and animal scream. Tearing holes in each other, sharp teeth and talons struggling for a hold, tearing away jaggedly and attacking again, imbedding deeper into muscle that strained with the effort of its own offensive.

The others, growing in number, pressing closer, straining for a glimpse of some edge in the murderous blur, some hint as to which one was closer to death.

And then it came: a sudden reversal, a grinding halt, a final flurry of motion. The black rat on top, its jaws clamped tight on the throat of the other, jerking it back and forth like a dog with a bloody rag. The other, fruitlessly kicking, eyes glazing over as its windpipe severed, sputtered, and sprayed . . .

. . . and Rudy Pasko was kneeling in the filth of the platform, with a large dead rat in his mouth.

When the uptown RR pulled out of the 8th Street station, there were only two people left on the platform: Louie, who was passed out some twenty yards from the southern mouth of the tunnel, and Fred, who was staggering around in a considerable stupor, looking for money that people might have dropped. Neither Louie nor Fred had held any gainful employment for the last eight years or so. Both of them smelled like ripe sewage on a hot plate. The uptown passengers on the RR were extremely glad that Louie and Fred had decided not to join them.

Louie snored while Fred dragged his gaze along the concrete floor. It didn't look promising for the great white hunter; if he found more than fifteen cents, he would have to consider himself lucky. Maybe—he wasn't quite sure—that'd give him enough for

another bottle of Muscatel if he got Louie to chip in . . .

There was a sound from the mouth of the tunnel. At first, Fred thought that it was just his buddy, shuffling around or something. But when he heard it again, he was looking directly at Louie, and Louie didn't seem to be moving at all.

"Whuzzizit?" he mumbled, wiping his eyes with a grimy paw. He staggered a little further down Louie's way and that was when he saw it.

Sitting at the very edge of the platform, right next to the far wall, was a wallet. Even from that distance, with his vision swimming like an Olympic gold medalist, Fred had no doubts as to what it was. It looked pretty fat, too, and Fred couldn't figure out for the life of him why he hadn't notice it before.

"Oboy," he said, making a jagged beeline toward the black leather goody. He briefly considered waking up Louie, but decided against it. *Piss on 'im*, he thought. *Gonna drink the whole bottle myself.*

He was almost up to the edge of the platform when the first wave of irrational fear hit him. He shrugged it off, having learned long before to ignore anything that didn't get him drunk. There was a gold buckle on the wallet; it twinkled in the overhead light like the wink of a harlot.

He was seduced. The wallet was so close now that he could almost smell the leather. He stumbled up to the yellow safety line, dropped to his knees, and reached out slowly with one trembling hand.

"Oboy," he said.

And then the hand whipped up from below: so cold, so fast, that Fred barely had time to gasp before it took him by the wrist and yanked him, head first, toward the rails . . .

Louie wasn't sure, at first, what woke him from the sleep of the mortally wasted. It happened suddenly; no dreamlike segue between his own little world and the big one outside his head, no break at all between total unconsciousness and as much attention as he could muster. Suddenly he was awake, staring bleary-eyed at the empty platform.

Alone.

"Wuh," he mumbled, wiping something wet from his mouth. Liquor and drool. It left a thin, glossy smear across his dirty hand. He wiped it on the hair that spilled down into his eyes, and looked around the platform again.

Dimly, in the back of his mind, it occurred to him that something was missing. He didn't know what it was, but it was there, or, rather, it was *not*. Louie grimaced, perplexed, and scratched absently at his itching scalp. His brain, pickled by the years, refused to cooperate.

And then he heard the sound that awakened him. Echoing crazily from the depths of the tunnel. Cutting off sharply, as if by a switch. And erupting again.

A scream.

Louie dragged himself forward for about a yard before he could get to his feet. It came again . . . horrible, tortured, pleading . . . and stopped abruptly. He craned his neck, stumbled, and fell on his face. For a second, he forgot where he was, then remembered; his ears pricked up like a dog's, and his bowels threatened to let go in terror.

But the screaming had stopped.

"Fred?" he whispered.

Then, from somewhere deep in the forever darkness, a low rumbling: faint at first, but slowly gathering force as it drew closer and closer to where he lay, trembling, on the cold concrete. The rumble became a roar, like thunder. For the second time today, Louie pissed himself; but this time he was awake, and whimpering, as two bright circles of brilliance glared out of the tunnel like a pair of hellish eyes.

And as the express train hurtled through the 8th Street station, Louie was not at all sure whether the puny screams that he heard were a last dying echo from the shadows beyond, or whether they were his own.

It watched her from the darkness of the tunnel.

She was a fat, ugly, middle-aged woman with a large, hairy wart displayed prominently on her left cheek. Her dress was preposterous: a shapeless mass of fabric that had once been brightly colored, but which had faded and worn away through the years into a dull, dingy opacity. Her hair hung lifelessly down either side of her face, the color of a healthy dog's stool.

Nobody was near her. A few others were gathered around the middle of the platform, near the safety of the turnstiles; they were not paying any attention to her. She had chosen to wander down to the end, with her grocery bags full of bric-a-brac in a clumsy pile at her feet.

She picked her nose with a flabby finger, indifferent to the reaction it might provoke. She flicked a dry, pale strip of mucus onto the tracks with a graceless minimum of effort.

It was sickened, watching her. It leaned against the cold wall of the tunnel, pressing its cheek against the moist stone, and contemptuous nausea bubbled up in its empty stomach. If the disgust could compete with the hunger, it would turn away now and leave this woman to some other ghastly fate.

But it was hungry. Oh, yes. Unbelievably, ravenously hungry. And this woman, unpleasant as she appeared, seemed to have an awful lot to offer in the way of food.

It considered snatching her from the platform, then decided against the idea. There were others—too many others—and it did not want to be seen. Not now.

Not yet.

It waited, watching. Two more people made their way down onto the platform. They remained near the entrance as well. It appreciated their good sense, in light of all the nasty horrible things that had gone down in the subway of late. It chuckled, more than a little mad.

And it waited.

Presently, a deep rumbling from the darkness behind it announced the imminent arrival of the uptown local. It ducked deeper into the shadows, waiting for the next train to pass, and tried to figure out how to time its next move.

Within a minute, light began to creep along the rails heralding the final approach. It hunkered back even further, into a niche, and as the train whipped by, the thing in the tunnels was quite certain that its presence had not been given away.

It waited for the train to screech to a halt before moving. Even then, it moved as silently as possible. When it heard the doors slide open, it slipped quickly up to the back of the train, then sidled along the far side until it came to the space between the last two cars. It jumped up onto the metal platform. Crouched down, unseen. And waited for the train to start rolling again.

The waiting lasted only a moment.

Then, as the train disappeared back into the darkness, it rose to its feet. Slowly, very slowly, it opened the door to the rear car, stepped inside. Closed the door.

And, barely realizing that it had done so, ripped the handle off in its hand.

• • •

Armond Hacdorian was a quiet, dignified, peaceful old gentleman of Rumanian descent. With his neatly tailored suit and carved walking stick, he bore more than a passing resemblance to Sir Laurence Olivier in *The Boys from Brazil*: the same fragile good looks, not so much withered as weathered and beaten by time.

He had suffered more horrors than most people would encounter if they lived to be two hundred. Armond was only seventy-five, however, and he expected to spend the next twenty years, at least, in an atmosphere of some decency and sanity. That would be sufficient, he felt. That would balance the scales.

If there was one more horror that Armond Hacdorian was *not* willing to suffer, it was the horror of being seated next to a young Neanderthal with a radio twice the size of his head. Not only did it offend his sensibilities, not only did it hurt his ears, not only did it seek to intimidate every other single person on the train, *more* than all of that, it threatened to make him angry.

And anger was something that he wanted no part of. Anger was something that he hoped to have outgrown, like the impulse toward cruelty, or his swaddling clothes. He had seen the wages of anger and its dark brethren. He had been through the wars, and the camps, and the purges. He had lost friends and family to Fate's brutal arbitrary blade. And if he never witnessed another act of violence—even of the tiniest sort—then he still would have seen too much.

Rather than dicker with the young boy, and endure anything from gross epithets to actual physical assault, he decided to move to the next car down. The boy could then listen to his rhythmic noise until every tooth in his mouth was shaken loose by it, for all it would concern Armond, though the Good Lord knew that Armond wished nothing but the best for the poor, misguided youth.

He got onto his feet gingerly—it was difficult for an old man to keep his footing on a moving train, no matter what kind of shape he was in—and turned toward the rear of the train. One step at a time, holding always onto the handgrips that dangled from over head, he moved slowly toward the door. Once he glanced back at the boy and his radio. He met a cold, uncomprehending set of eyes, and kept moving.

The train was moving with merciful smoothness; Armond crossed over to the door without incident. *Now will come the tricky part*, he told himself. *Crossing to the next car while the train is in motion. I must be a stupid old man, to try such a dangerous thing.*

Still, the train was riding smoothly and though the split platform between was somewhat treacherous, shifting and bouncing as it did, Armond felt that he should have no problem with the help of the guard rails.

He stuck one foot out onto the platform and stood there, poised like a surfer. It seemed all right. He held on to the door frame and brought his other foot around. When both feet were on the platform, he reached over to the guard rail with his left hand, steadied himself, and pulled himself over to the door of the rear car.

There was nothing to it. Chuckling slightly, he reached over to open the door, pleasantly aware of his heart's quick pounding in his temples.

The door wouldn't open.

What? he thought, as the handle clicked futilely, and for the first time since he made up his mind to move, he was afraid. He twisted on the handle again, vainly, and grappled for a moment with panic.

It's all right, he thought. *I can always go back.* It seemed to help pacify the little voices that were gibbering in the back of his head, like the voices of people in cattle cars being led to the ovens. It seemed to calm them down.

He paused for a moment in the doorway, catching his breath and resting. When the rate of his heartbeat returned to normal, he took just a quick peek in through the window before turning to go back ...

The lights went out.

From somewhere in the darkness ahead, a fleeting movement.

What? he thought again. With his failing eyesight, he could only dimly perceive the shape on the right-hand side of the train. It seemed to be thrashing, making some sort of rapid movement, although Armond couldn't really tell if he was imagining it or not. He stared concertedly, trying to make sense of the shadow-play before him ...

... and then the lights flashed on again, and he saw the dark, slim figure standing over the enormous pale one, with its fat limbs

kicking and flailing while the dark one leaned over and . . .

The lights went out again.

"My God," Armond whispered. The shapes blended back into one again; he could no longer distinguish between them. He saw the one dark shape rise from the seats, hang there for a moment, and then fly to one side . . .

. . . as the sound of shattering glass drifted quietly to his ears like a distant, delicate music box . . .

. . . as the lights came back on, and he saw the dark shape dragging the other one's throat across the windowsill, while hot blood gushed over the wall and the seats and into the tunnel beyond . . .

. . . as a scream strangled in Armond's throat, and . . .

The lights went off again.

And stayed that way.

There, in the dark space between cars, Armond Hacdorian stood with his face pressed against the window of the broken door. There, immersed in the wind and the roar of the train, he watched the monster feed. Unnoticed, he watched. Until it was done.

It was not easy for the old man to maintain consciousness under such circumstances, no matter what kind of shape he was in, but Armond managed to pull himself back into the car that he came from, find a seat, and ease himself into it before he blacked out.

Perhaps it was because he'd seen more horror than most people would if they lived to be two hundred, and, whether he liked it or not, he could handle it.

When it had finished with the headless, stinking thing beside it, the thing from the tunnels paused for a moment in bloated, almost-drunken elation. Then, remembering its situation, it rose to its feet and looked out through the door to the next car.

Nothing. It appeared that no one had seen it. And that was very, very good.

It returned its attention to the terrible dead thing on the seat. There was blood everywhere. The rich, ripe smell burned in its nostrils, reawakening the hunger. But it had had its fill.

A strange idea came to it, then: something so marvelously, thoroughly twisted that it was amazed with itself for not having thought of it sooner. With a tittering, high-pitched giggle, it leaned

over the corpse and dipped a finger into the jagged, dripping stump of the neck.

Withdrew the glistening tip.

Smiled.

And began to draw.

Profile: Bram Stoker

by THOMAS E. SANDERS (NIPPAWANOCK)

A profile of that peculiar Irishman
who brought the world *Dracula*.

He lived among the crepuscular feeders, the pale poseurs, the nocturnal diversionaries cast into and cast of the Victorian period. Plagues framed his life: at the entrance, cholera; at the exit, syphilis. Creatures of darkness and death filled his invented world: Stalking humans, bats fluttered through its air; cats and rats crept silently across its land; the white worm writhed in its moldering loam.

All of his real world was the stage, and the players there consumed him utterly, leaving "Exhaustion" as one of the causes on his death certificate. In his lifetime, Bram Stoker was known primarily as the manager of a celebrity of the day, the first English actor to be knighted. After his death, Stoker became widely known as the author of a book that has never been out of print since its publication in 1897. Few people today have even heard of the actor, Henry Irving; even the most uninformed, even illiterate, probably recognize the title of the book: *Dracula*.

The cholera epidemic which preceded Stoker's birth decimated Ireland when his mother was a girl in Sligo. She recorded it with morbid fascination and told grim stories to her children. One written account describes the death of a traveler: Taken ill on the road, he was tended by anonymous "samaritans" who "dug a pit and with long poles pushed him living into it, and covered him

up quick, alive." As the plague moved in, the town became a place of the dead. The Thornley family escaped it by staying inside their carefully fumigated house, not opening it to anyone—especially the coffin-maker who solicited business door-to-door.

Swarms of looters followed the plague, robbing deserted houses. Charlotte's sister-in-law added her own chilling anecdote: Toward the end, "on one of the last desperate days, Charlotte saw a hand reaching through the skylight. Seizing an axe, she cut it off with one tremendous blow."

Later, Charlotte gave *her* hand in marriage to Abraham Stoker, a civil servant twenty years her senior but of apparently undiminished appetites. Charlotte, in addition to her memories, had great ambition for Abraham Jr. (born in 1847) and his four brothers, observable indifference to her two daughters—all born in Dublin where her husband was a civil servant at Dublin Castle until he retired.

In those unpolluted days, Bram could see all the way to the bay and the sea beyond; so, it wasn't foul air that confined him to his room. The doctor couldn't find a physical reason, but, for the first eight years of his life, *there* Bram languished and listened to Charlotte's tales. Years later, he penned a volume of children's stories titled *Under the Sunset* and dedicated it to his only child, Noel. One of the stories, "The Invisible Giant," is a nasty little thing about an orphan who looked out of her window, "shading her eyes with her *hand* to see more clearly.... Beyond the city she saw a vast shadowy Form ... shrouded in a great misty robe that covered it, fading away into air so that she could only see the face and the grim, spectral *hands*.... The *hand* of one who was a ringleader was already outstretched, when he gave a low cry, and pressed his *hand* to his side; and, whilst the others turned to look at him in wonder, he cried out in great pain, and screamed horribly. Even whilst the people looked, his face grew blacker and blacker, and he fell down before them, and writhed a while in pain, and then died.... the Giant—Plague—was amongst and around them, and there was no escaping, for it was now too late to fly." Hands have always played featured roles in literature, but these hands (whatever their psychological lineage) dominate the action and are the forerunners of other featured hands throughout Stoker's works.

When Bram was nine, he got off his own hands and got on with life, becoming, by the time he was seventeen and entering

Trinity College, "a red-haired giant." There he won his cap as a footballer, was unbeaten in walking marathons, and won six silver goblets in gymnastics and foot races. He distinguished himself academically, became auditor of the Historical Society (equivalent to student body president) and President of the Philosophical Society, a post demanding lectures. His first address: "Sensationalism in Fiction and Society." He was, you could say, opposed to it, an observation that proves the generalization about the unrealistic attitudes of students. His great-nephew was to say, "The more I learn of Bram, the more schizophrenic he appears." It would be hard to argue with that statement.

In some ways, Bram was his own model for the dewy-eyed heroines who, one day, would tenant the thoroughly bad Victorian romances he would write. His liaisons were as passionate, but they were unconsummated. He was, seemingly, a heterosexual adulator of talented male celebrities. Today he would be a groupie who becomes part of the entourage as a result of his managerial services rather than his sexual availability.

He first saw the relatively unknown Henry Irving in a London touring company production at Dublin's Theatre Royal. Of the twenty-nine-year-old actor, the nineteen-year-old student wrote: "What I saw, to my amazement and delight, was a patrician figure as real as the person of one's dreams." A drama critic considered Irving "stiff and constrained." Bram considered the critic professionally misplaced. Three years later, Bram had completed his schooling and was working as a clerk at Dublin Castle when Irving returned in a comedy that no paper reviewed. After seeing the play three times in two weeks, Stoker volunteered to become the unpaid critic for the *Dublin Mail* to prevent such future injustices. He got the job.

When he was twenty-one, Bram read the infamous *Leaves of Grass* and became such a Walt Whitman fan that he wrote several letters to the scandalous poet. They elicited no response until, one midnight after defending Whitman at a literary meeting, Stoker wrote a letter "in which I poured out my heart." Whitman answered: "You did well to write to me so unconventionally, so fresh, so manly and so affectionately too." Years later, Bram met his poetic idol—three times in the space of four years—when Henry Irving was making American tours with Stoker as the manager of his company. Whitman pronounced Stoker, "A broth of a boy" and "like a breath of good, healthy, breezy sea air."

Bram was enthralled by Whitman, even offering to promote *Leaves of Grass* if Whitman would shorten it. Whitman refused. Then, though the most deadly result of promiscuous sex would figure in Stoker's death, it is doubtful he understood Whitman's boy-love concept. "Life upon the wicked stage" was one thing, but he was never an actor; he just took care of the books.

The nineteen-year-old boy who had fallen under the spell of the peripatetic actor was a twenty-nine-year-old man before he saw his idol again. In the interim, he had written a dreadful, four-part serial titled *The Chain of Destiny* which was published in *Shamrock*, a Dublin magazine. One of the characters was "the phantom of the fiend." The work was a foray into horror—in both plot and style. Stoker also met and became enamored of a "Miss Henry," an actress he met in Paris on the way to visit his parents in Switzerland where they lived in retirement. He had more or less committed himself to give up his civil service job, move to London, and write a play for the young lady. He couldn't bring himself to tell his parents his plans in person. He wrote them in a letter after he returned to Dublin. If "Miss Henry" had a first name, he didn't reveal it—then or ever.

Abraham Sr. counseled in reply: "I don't think actors and actresses are altogether desirable acquaintances. . . . I believe such acquaintanceship is better avoided." Bram abstracted himself forthwith from the lady and remained at his post in Dublin Castle where, as part of his job, he was writing a bloodless little book titled *Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland*. Perhaps to escape the boredom of that project, he was revelling in *Carmilla*, a bloody novel about a female vampire by fellow Dubliner Sheridan Le Fanu. Bram was never to escape the lady's charms, even using her name in a deleted chapter of his novel *Dracula* written many years later. After Bram died, his wife authorized publication of the chapter as a short story titled "Dracula's Guest."

He had been a drama critic for five years when Irving returned to Dublin the second time in *Hamlet*, a performance Bram saw three times and reviewed twice in the space of five days. His reviews were so effusive that Irving invited him to supper after the play one evening and to dinner on Sunday—after which the actor recited Thomas Hood's melodramatic narrative poem "The Dream of Eugene Aram" to an enthralled Stoker. Enthralled? No—bewitched. Years later in his *Personal Reminiscences*

of Henry Irving, Stoker said of the emotional bond that sprang into being that night, "'Love' is not too strong a word for the relationship that developed!" (Sometimes Bram's punctuation was as excessive as his sentiments.) Irving dashed into the bedroom to return almost immediately with a photograph on which the ink was still wet: "My dear friend, Stoker. God Bless You! God Bless You! Henry Irving. Dublin, December 3, 1876." Recorded Bram: "Soul looked into soul! From that hour began a friendship as profound, as close, as lasting as can be between two men!" Exclamation marks fill the prose of the period like guano fills some caves, but the sentiment was true. They remained almost constant companions all their lives, for, from that time, they arranged meetings, Bram going up to London for Irving's performances at the Lyceum Theatre or Irving returning to Dublin in *Hamlet*. The critic's reviews became paeans; he would countenance no negative criticism of the actor; he summarized their free time: "A small party of us, of whom Irving and I were always two, [emphasis Stoker's] very often had supper in those restaurants which were a famous feature of men's social life in Dublin." For a couple of years, they were always two.

Miss Henry had been unable to lure Bram to a new profession with her in London, but Henry Irving was a thespian of a different stripe. In 1878, the actor committed himself to the Lyceum (a not uncommon practice at the time) and asked Stoker to become acting manager for the company. Stoker did not consult Abraham and Charlotte. He just resigned from his civil service post of thirteen years, married Florence Anne Lemon Balcome with almost unseemly haste, breezed through a five-day honeymoon, and delivered himself and Florrie into Irving's sphere.

The new bride was no stranger to the theatrical act, for she had been wooed earlier by Oscar Wilde but had, for unspecified reasons, dropped him, refusing to return his gift of an inexpensive cross engraved with his name. He had already outraged some proper Victorians by the time he married his wife six years later, and, though Bram became a favorite of Wilde's parents, he never much cared for the man who was to carry a lily through Picadilly, try W. S. Gilbert's *Patience*, and go off to Reading Gaol for unspeakable practices with his own broth of a boy. Florrie gave Bram one child, son Irving Noel Thornley Stoker. (The boy dropped Irving from his name as soon as he had any say in the matter.) Charlotte seems to have accepted Bram's wife, but she

was less charitable about his new position which she called "Manager to a strolling player," the verbal equivalent of a stake through Bram's heart.

Irving and the Lyceum Theatre were to be Bram's lifeblood for the next twenty-seven years. Until the theater burned and Irving died, they brought Bram into close contact with a great cast of artists from the beautiful and versatile Ellen Terry, Irving's leading lady, to most of England's painters of note. John Singer Sargent painted the remarkable portrait of Terry while James McNeill Whistler tried to engage Stoker as his agent. Bram refused Whistler's amazing offer: "I would give half of all I earned and be grateful for a life without care." Bram was too busy keeping the extravagant Irving and the economically insatiable Lyceum solvent to take on Whistler. A parade of writers frequented the Stoker house. Florence carried on a harmless flirtation with W. S. Gilbert who insulted Wilde in the Bunthorne role and minimized Irving, an act Bram managed to forgive though he would tolerate it from no one else. Once when he was asked if he had seen a performance of Irving's, Gilbert said, "I attend pantomimes only at Christmas." Florrie managed to juggle Wilde and Gilbert in the house without alienating either, and Bram became reconciled enough with Wilde (if unsubstantiated rumor can be credited) to take money to that aesthete on some of his Parisian prowls.

Mark Twain visited the Stokers and, later, attempted to engage Bram in an economic venture. Twain's lack of business acumen was no secret to the artful manager of the spendthrift Irving and company and he politely but wisely declined. Stoker's closest friend (Irving was always beyond that epithet) was the most widely-read, best-selling author of the day. His imminently forgettable *The Eternal City* sold a million copies though *The Manxman*, which Bram helped him draft, was his most distinguished success. The name Hall Caine is almost unknown today, but he has never been out of the public eye since 1897, for Stoker dedicated *Dracula* to "My Dear Friend Hommy Beg," Caine's childhood nickname.

Already seventy when he met Stoker, Alfred Lord Tennyson remained a friend to his death at eighty-three. Irving was knighted. Bram's pretentious brother, William Thornley, was knighted for his work as a surgeon. Hall Caine was knighted. Bram dined with the Prince of Wales, attended the wedding of Winston Churchill

in 1906. In short, always self-effacing, modest, discreet, Bram Stoker knew the rich, the famous, and the infamous. Yet none was as timeless, interesting, or exotic as the Transylvanian count he created or Lady Arabella March, the nightcrawler of *The Lair of the White Worm*, his last book.

Although an historical record of Stoker's sex life is virtually nonexistent, the surreptitious, the latent, the covert sex that permeates his writing ranges through the suggestive avenues of the beast with two backs of his romantic novels, down the anal and oral roads of gothic excitation in his vampiric accounts, onto the sado-masochistic lanes of such a story as "The Squaw," and into the alleys and subterranean tunnels of the seminal necrophilia and ghoulish cannibalism of "The Judge's House" and "The Burial of the Rats." Still, the psychosexual suggestiveness of certain historical events is provocative enough for anyone seeking titillation. The child entombed in his bedchamber for eight years suddenly emerged as a hale and hearty lad to become a handsome giant and bosom friend of the libertines who played out their careers in the repressive Victorian night. On one occasion, Bram dived from the steamboat *Twilight* into the Thames to drag a would-be-suicide from the water. He carried the insensible man to his house and went to fetch a doctor. Florence walked in to find a corpse dripping all over the dining room carpet, not unlike a rat delivered by a tomcat as a courting gift to a pussy. Florence was reputed to be a cold woman thereafter. Irving was too often as much a third party in their marriage as was the thrill-seeking man from Bleeding Gulch in "The Squaw," and Bram did take discreet separate vacations to Paris where, he is reported to have said, he needed only three words: *pain, vin, bain*. His whispered reputation as a "womaniser" probably originated there. About the time *Dracula* was printed, he probably contracted the disease that, with exhaustion, was to be the ultimate cause of his death. His death certificate reads: "Locomotor Ataxy 6 months Granular Contracted Kidney. Exhaustion. Certified by James Browne M.D." Translation: Tertiary syphilis culminating in exhaustion and death.

The brilliant money manager for others died at sixty-four years of age in 1912 after the Lyceum Theater had burned down and the great Irving had decayed into age and expired. Bram left a very modest estate of £4,723. His mother's prediction about *Dracula* almost came true: "No book since Mrs. Shelley's

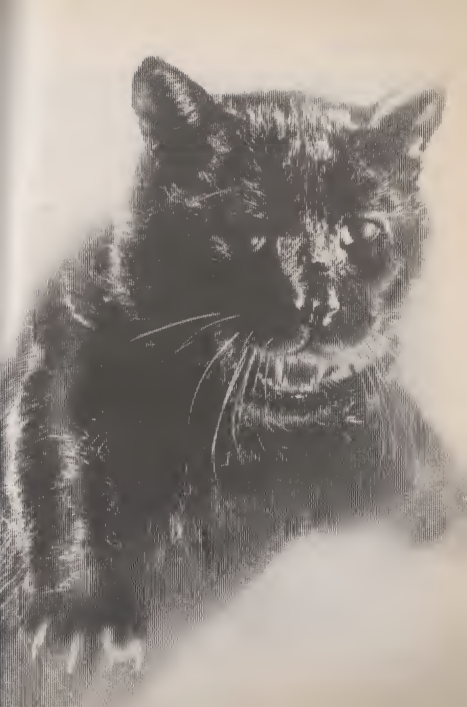
'Frankenstein' or indeed any other at all has come near yours in originality or terror.... In its terrible excitement it should make a widespread reputation and much money for you." He did not profit from the classic of horror, but the cold wife who outlived him did. Florence sold the dramatic rights in 1924 for an undisclosed amount, the movie rights in 1931 for \$40,000—six years before she too was taken by that final ubiquitous plague that drains our blood and takes us all to the lair of the white worm.

The Squaw

by BRAM STOKER

There was something *right* about seeing the infamous Iron Virgin of Nurnberg—one of the most exquisite torture devices ever built—in the company of a man like Elias P. Hutcheson.

Nurnberg at the time was not so much exploited as it has been since then. Irving had not been playing *Faust*, and the very name of the old town was hardly known to the great bulk of the traveling public. My wife and I, being in the second week of our honeymoon, naturally wanted someone else to join our party, so that when the cheery stranger, Elias P. Hutcheson, hailing from Isthmian City, Bleeding Gulch, Maple Tree County, Nebraska, turned up at the station at Frankfort and casually remarked that he was going on to see the most all-fired old Methuselah of a town in Yurrup, and that he guessed that so much traveling alone was enough to send an active intelligent citizen into the melancholy ward of a daft house, we took the pretty broad hint and suggested that we should join forces. We found, on comparing notes afterward, that we had each intended to speak with some diffidence or hesitation so as not to appear too eager, such not being a good compliment to the success of our married life; but the effect was entirely marred by our both beginning to speak at the same instant—stopping simultaneously and then going on together again. Anyhow, no matter how, it was done; and Elias P. Hutcheson became one of our party. Straightaway Amelia and I found the pleasant benefit; instead of quarreling, as we had been doing, we found that the restraining influence of a third party was such



that we now took every opportunity of spooning in odd corners. Amelia declares that ever since she has, as the result of that experience, advised all her friends to take a friend on the honeymoon. Well, we "did" Nurnberg together, and much enjoyed the racy remarks of our Transatlantic friend, who, from his quaint speech and his wonderful stock of adventures, might have stepped out of a novel. We kept for the last object of interest in the city to be visited the Burg, and on the day appointed for the visit strolled round the outer wall of the city by the eastern side.

The Burg is seated on a rock dominating the town and an immensely deep fosse guards it on the northern side. Nurnberg has been happy in that it was never sacked; had it been it would certainly not be so spick-and-span perfect as it is at present. The ditch has not been used for centuries, and now its base is spread with tea-gardens and orchards, of which some of the trees are of quite respectable growth. As we wandered round the wall, dawdling in the hot July sunshine, we often paused to admire the views spread before us, and in especial the great plain covered with towns and villages and bounded with a blue line of hills, like a landscape of Claude Lorraine. From this we always turned with new delight to the city itself, with its myriad of quaint old gables and acre-wide red roofs dotted with dormer windows, tier upon tier. A little to our right rose the towers of the Burg, and nearer still standing grim, the Torture Tower, which was, and is, perhaps, the most interesting place in the city. For centuries the tradition of the Iron Virgin of Nurnberg has been handed down as an instance of the horrors of cruelty of which man is capable; we had long looked forward to seeing it; and here at last was its home.

In one of our pauses we leaned over the wall of the moat and looked down. The garden seemed quite fifty or sixty feet below us, and the sun pouring into it with an intense, moveless heat like that of an oven. Beyond rose the grey, grim wall seemingly of endless height, and losing itself right and left in the angles of bastion and counterscarp. Trees and bushes crowned the wall, and above again towered the lofty houses on whose massive beauty time has only set the hand of approval. The sun was hot and we were lazy; time was our own, and we lingered, leaning on the wall. Just below us a pretty sight—a great black cat lying stretched in the sun, while around her gambolled prettily a tiny black kitten. The mother would wave her tail for the kitten to play with, or

would raise her feet and push away the little one as an encouragement to further play. They were just at the foot of the wall, and Elias P. Hutcheson, in order to help the play, stooped and took from the walk a moderate sized pebble.

"See!" he said, "I will drop it near the kitten, and they will both wonder where it came from."

"Oh, be careful," said my wife, "you might hit the dear little thing!"

"Not me, ma'am," said Elias P. "Why, I'm as tender as a Maine cherry tree. Lor, bless ye, I wouldn't hurt the poor pooty little critter more'n I'd scalp a baby. An' you may bet your variegated socks on that! See, I'll drop it fur away on the outside so's not to go near her!" Thus saying, he leaned over and held his arm out at full length and dropped the stone. It may be that there is some attractive force which draws lesser matters to greater; or more probably that the wall was not plump but sloped to its base—we not noticing the inclination from above; but the stone fell with a sickening thud that came up to us through the hot air, right on the kitten's head, and shattered out its little brains then and there. The black cat cast a swift upward glance, and we saw her eyes like green fire fixed an instant on Elias P. Hutcheson; and then her attention was given to the kitten, which lay still with just a quiver of her tiny limbs while a thin red stream trickled from a gaping wound. With a muffled cry, such as a human being might give, she bent over the kitten licking its wounds and moaning. Suddenly she seemed to realize that it was dead, and again threw her eyes up at us. I shall never forget the sight, for she looked the perfect incarnation of hate. Her green eyes blazed with lurid fire, and the white, sharp teeth, and her claws stood out stark and at full length on every paw. Then she made a wild rush up the wall as if to reach us, but, when the momentum ended, fell back, and further added to her horrible appearance for she fell on the kitten, and rose with her black fur smeared with its brains and blood. Amelia turned quite faint, and I had to lift her back from the wall. There was a seat close by in shade of a spreading plane tree, and here I placed her while she composed herself. Then I went back to Hutcheson, who stood without moving, looking down on the angry cat below.

As I joined him, he said:

"Well, I guess that air the savagest beast I ever see—'cept once when an Apache squaw had an edge on a half-breed what

they nicknamed 'Splinters' 'cos of the way he fixed up her papoose which he stole on a raid just to show that he appreciated the way they had given his mother the fire torture. She got that kinder look so set on her face that it jest seemed to grow there. She followed Splinters mor'n three year till at last the braves got him and handed him over to her. They did say that no man, white or Injun, had ever been so long a-dying under the tortures of the Apaches. The only time I ever see her smile was when I wiped her out. I kem on the camp just in time to see Splinters pass in his checks, and he wasn't sorry to go either. He was a hard citizen, and though I never could shake with him after the papoose business—for it was bitter bad, and he should have been a white man, for he looked like one—I see he had got paid out in full. Durn me, but I took a piece of his hide from one of his skinnin' posts an' had it made into a pocketbook. It's here now!" and he slapped the breast pocket of his coat.

While he was speaking the cat was continuing her frantic efforts to get up the wall. She would take a run back and then charge up, sometimes reaching an incredible height. She did not seem to mind the heavy fall which she got each time but started with renewed vigor; and at every tumble her appearance became more horrible. Hutcheson was a kind-hearted man—my wife and I had both noticed little acts of kindness to animals as well as to persons—and he seemed concerned at the state of fury to which the cat had wrought herself.

"Wall, now!" he said, "I du declare that that poor critter seems quite desperate. There! There! Poor thing, it was all an accident—though that won't bring back your little one to you. Say! I wouldn't have had such a thing happen for a thousand! Just shows what a clumsy fool of a man can do when he tries to play! Seems I'm too darned slipperhanded to even play with a cat. Say Colonel!"—it was a pleasant way he had to bestow titles freely—"I hope your wife don't hold no grudge against me on account of this unpleasantness? Why, I wouldn't have had it occur on no account."

He came over to Amelia and apologized profusely, and she with her usual kindness of heart hastened to assure him that she quite understood that it was an accident. Then we all went again to the wall and looked over.

The cat, missing Hutcheson's, face had drawn back across the moat, and was sitting on her haunches as though ready to spring.

Indeed, the very instant she saw him she did spring, and with a blind unreasoning fury, which would have been grotesque, only that it was so frightfully real. She did not try to run up the wall, but simply launched herself at him as though hate and fury could lend her wings to pass straight through the great distance between them. Amelia, womanlike, got quite concerned, and said to Elias P. in a warning voice:

"Oh! You must be very careful. That animal would try to kill you if she were here; her eyes look like positive murder."

He laughed out jovially. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said, "but I can't help laughin'. Fancy a man that has fought grizzlies an' Injuns bein' careful of bein' murdered by a cat!"

When the cat heard him laugh, her whole demeanor seemed to change. She no longer tried to jump or run up the wall, but went quietly over, and sitting again beside the dead kitten began to lick and fondle it as though it were alive.

"Seel!" said I, "the effect of a really strong man. Even that animal in the midst of her fury recognizes the voice of a master, and bows to him!"

"Like a squaw!" was the only comment of Elias P. Hutcheson, as we moved on our way round the city fosse. Every now and then we looked over the wall and each time saw the cat following us. At first she had kept going back to the dead kitten, and then as the distance grew greater took it in her mouth and so followed. After a while, however, she abandoned this, for we saw her following all alone; she had evidently hidden the body somewhere. Amelia's alarm grew at the cat's persistence, and more than once she repeated her warning; but the American always laughed with amusement, till finally, seeing that she was beginning to be worried, he said:

"I say, ma'am, you needn't be skeered over that cat. I go heeled, I du!" Here he slapped his pistol pocket at the back of his lumbar region. "Why sooner'n have you worried, I'll shoot the critter, right here, an' risk the police interferin' with a citizen of the United States for carryin' arms contrary to reg'lations!" As he spoke he looked over the wall, but the cat, on seeing him, retreated with a growl into a bed of tall flowers and was hidden. He went on: "Blest if that ar critter ain't got more sense of what's good for her than most Christians. I guess we've seen the last of her! You bet, she'll go beck now to that busted kitten and have a private funeral of it, all to herself."

Amelia did not like to say more, lest he might, in mistaken kindness to her, fulfill his threat of shooting the cat: and so we went on and crossed the little wooden bridge leading to the gateway whence ran the steep paved roadway between the Burg and the pentagonal Torture Tower. As we crossed the bridge we saw the cat again down below us. When she saw us her fury seemed to return, and she made frantic efforts to get up the steep wall. Hutcheson laughed as he looked down at her, and said:

"Goodbye, old girl. Sorry I injured your feelin's, but you'll get over it in time! So long!" And then we passed through the long, dim archway and came to the gate of the Burg.

When we came out again after our survey of this most beautiful old place which not even the well-intentioned efforts of the Gothic restorers of forty years ago have been able to spoil—though their restoration was then glaring white—we seemed to have quite forgotten the unpleasant episode of the morning. The old lime tree with its great trunk gnarled with the passing of nearly nine centuries, the deep well cut through the heart of the rock by those captives of old, and the lovely view from the city wall whence we heard, spread over almost a full quarter of an hour, the multitudinous chimes of the city, had all helped to wipe out from our minds the incident of the slain kitten.

We were the only visitors who had entered the Torture Tower that morning—so at least said the old custodian—and as we had the place all to ourselves were able to make a minute and more satisfactory survey than would have otherwise been possible. The custodian, looking to us as the sole source of his gains for the day, was willing to meet our wishes in any way. The Torture Tower is truly a grim place, even now when many thousands of visitors have sent a stream of life and the joy that follows life into the place; but at the time I mention it wore its grimmest and most gruesome aspect. The dust of ages seemed to have settled on it, and the darkness and the horror of its memories seemed to have become sentient in a way that would have satisfied the Pantheistic souls of Philo or Spinoza. The lower chamber where we entered was, seemingly, in its normal state filled with incarnate darkness; even the hot sunlight streaming in through the door seemed to be lost in the vast thickness of the walls, and only showed the masonry rough as when the builder's scaffolding had come down, but coated with dust and marked here and there in patches of dark stain which, if walls could speak, could have given

their own dread memories of fear and pain. We were glad to pass up the dusty wooden staircase, the custodian leaving the outer door open to light us somewhat on our way; for to our eyes the one long-wicked evil-smelling candle stuck in a sconce on the wall gave an inadequate light. When we came up through the open trap in the corner of the chamber overhead, Amelia held on to me so tightly that I could actually feel her heartbeat. I must say for my own part that I was not surprised at her fear, for this room was even more gruesome than that below. Here there was certainly more light, but only just sufficient to realize the horrible surroundings of the place. The builders of the tower had evidently intended that only they who should gain the top should have any of the joys of light and prospect. There, as we had noticed from below, were ranges of windows, albeit of medieval smallness, but elsewhere in the tower were only a very few narrow slits such as were habitual in places of medieval defense. A few of these only lit the chamber, and these so high up in the wall that from no part could the sky be seen through the thickness of the walls. In racks, and leaning in disorder against the walls, were a number of headsman's swords, great double-handed weapons with broad blades and keen edges. Hard by were several blocks whereon the necks of the victims had lain, with here and there deep notches where the steel had bitten through the guard of flesh and shored into the wood. Round the chamber, placed in all sorts of irregular ways, were many implements of torture which made one's heart ache to see—chairs full of spikes which gave instant and excruciating pain; chairs and couches with dull knobs whose torture was seemingly less, but which, though slower, were equally efficacious; racks, belts, boots, gloves, collars, all made for compressing at will; steel baskets in which the head could be slowly crushed into a pulp if necessary; watchmen's hooks with long handles and knives that cut at resistance—this a specialty of the old Nurnberg police system; and many, many other devices of man's injury to man. Amelia grew quite pale with the horror of the things, but fortunately did not faint, for being a little overcome she sat down on a torture chair, but jumped up again with a shriek, all tendency to faint gone. We both pretended that it was the injury done to her dress by the dust of the chair, and the rusty spikes which had upset her, and Mr. Hutcheson acquiesced in accepting the explanation with a kind-hearted laugh.

But the central object in the whole of this chamber of hor-

rors was the engine known as the Iron Virgin, which stood near the center of the room. It was a rudely-shaped figure of a woman, something of the bell order, or, to make a closer comparison, of the figure of Mrs. Noah in the children's Ark, but without the slimness of waist and perfect *rondeur* of hip which marks the aesthetic type of the Noah family. One would hardly have recognized it as intended for a human figure at all had not the founder shaped on the forehead a rude semblance of a woman's face. This machine was coated with rust without, and covered with dust; a rope was fastened to a ring in the front of the figure, about where the waist should have been, and was drawn through a pulley, fastened on the wooden pillar which sustained the flooring above. The custodian pulling this rope showed that a section of the front was hinged like a door at one side; we then saw that the engine was of considerable thickness, leaving just room enough inside for a man to be placed. The door was of equal thickness and of great weight, for it took the custodian all his strength, aided though he was by the contrivance of the pulley, to open it. This weight was partly due to the fact that the door was of manifest purpose hung so as to throw its weight downward, so that it might shut of its own accord when the strain was released. The inside was honeycombed with rust—nay more, the rust alone that comes through time would hardly have eaten so deep into the iron walls; the rust of the cruel stains was deep indeed! It was only, however, when we came to look at the inside of the door that the diabolical intention was manifest to the full. Here were several long spikes, square and massive, broad at the base and sharp at the points, placed in such a position that when the door should close the upper ones would pierce the eyes of the victim, and the lower ones his heart and vitals. The sight was too much for poor Amelia, and this time she fainted dead off, and I had to carry her down the stairs and place her on a bench outside till she recovered. That she felt it to the quick was afterward shown by the fact that my eldest son bears to this day a rude birthmark on his breast, which has, by family consent, been accepted as representing the Nurnberg Virgin.

When we got back to the chamber we found Hutcheson still opposite the Iron Virgin; he had been evidently philosophizing and now gave us the benefit of his thought in the shape of a sort of exordium.

"Wall, I guess I've been learnin' somethin' here while madam

has been gettin' over her faint. 'Pears to me that we're a long way behind the times on our side of the big drink. We uster think out on the plains that the Injun could give us points in tryin' to make a man uncomfortable; but I guess your old medieval law-and-order party could raise him every time. Splinters was pretty good in his bluff on the squaw, but this here young miss held a straight flush all high on him. The points of them spikes air sharp enough still, though even the edges air eaten out by what uster be on them. It'd be a good thing for our Indian section to get some specimens of this here play-toy to send round to the Reservations jest to knock the stuffin' out of the bucks, and the squaws too, by showing them as how old civilization lays over them at their best. Guess but I'll get in that box a minute jest to see how it feels!"

"Oh no! No!" said Amelia, "It is too terrible!"

"Guess, ma'am, nothin's too terrible to the explorin' mind. I've been in some queer places in my time. Spent a night inside a dead horse while a prairie fire swept over me in Montana Territory—an' another time slept inside a dead buffler when the Comanches was on the war path an' I didn't keer to leave my kyard on them. I've been two days in a caved-in tunnel in the Billy Broncho gold mine in New Mexico, an' was one of the four shut up for three parts of a day in the caisson what slid over on her side when we was settin' the foundations of the Buffalo Bridge. I've not fuked an odd experience yet, an' I don't propose to begin now!"

We saw that he was set on the experiment, so I said: "Well, hurry up, old man, and get through it quick!"

"All right, General," said he, "but I calculate we ain't quite ready yet. The gentlemen, my predecessors, what stood in that thar canister, didn't volunteer for the office—not much! And I guess there was some ornamental tyin' up before the big stroke was made. I want to go into this thing fair and square, so I must get fixed up proper first. I dare say this old galoot can rise some string and tie me up accordin' to sample?"

This was said interrogatively to the old custodian, but the latter, who understood the drift of his speech, though perhaps not appreciating to the full the niceties of dialect and imagery, shook his head. His protest was, however, only formal and made to be overcome. The American thrust a gold piece into his hand, saying: "Take it, pard! It's your pot; and don't be skeer'd. This ain't no necktie party that you're asked to assist in!" He produced some

thin frayed rope and proceeded to bind our companion with sufficient strictness for the purpose. When the upper part of his body was bound, Hutcheson said;

"Hold on a moment, Judge. Guess I'm too heavy for you to tote into the canister. You jest let me walk in, and then you can wash up regardin' my legs!"

While speaking he had backed himself into the opening which was just enough to hold him. It was a close fit and no mistake. Amelia looked on with fear in her eyes, but she evidently did not like to say anything. Then the custodian completed his task by tying the American's feet together so that he was now absolutely helpless and fixed in his voluntary prison. He seemed to really enjoy it, and the incipient smile which was habitual to his face blossomed into actuality as he said:

"Guess this here Eve was made out of the rib of a dwarf! There ain't much room for a full-grown citizen of the United States to hustle. We uster make our coffins more roomier in Idaho territory. Now, Judge, you jest begin to let this door down, slow, onto me. I want to feel the same pleasure as the other jays had when those spikes began to move toward their eyes!"

"Oh no! No! No!" broke in Amelia hysterically. "It is too terrible! I can't bear to see it! I can't! I can't!"

But the American was obdurate. "Say, Colonel," said he, "why not take Madame for a little promenade? I wouldn't hurt her feelins for the world, but now that I am here, havin' kem eight thousand miles, wouldn't it be too hard to give up the very experience I've been pinin' an' pantin' fur? A man can't get to feel like canned goods every time! Me and the Judge here'll fix up this thing in no time, an' then you'll come back, an' we'll all laugh together!"

Once more the resolution that is born of curiosity triumphed, and Amelia stayed holding tight to my arm and shivering while the custodian began to slacken slowly inch by inch the rope that held back the iron door. Hutcheson's face was positively radiant as his eyes followed the first movement of the spikes.

"Wall!" he said, "I guess I've not had enjoyment like this since I left Noo York. Bar a scrap with a French sailor at Wapping—an' that warn't much of a picnic neither—I've not had a show fur real pleasure in this dod-rotted Continent, where there ain't no b'ars nor no Injuns, an' wheer nary man goes heeled. Slow there, Judge! Don't you rush this business! I want a show for my money this game—I du!"

The custodian must have had in him some of the blood of his predecessors in that ghastly tower, for he worked the engine with a deliberate and excruciating slowness which after five minutes, in which the outer edge of the door had not moved half as many inches, began to overcome Amelia. I saw her lips whiten, and felt her hold upon my arm relax. I looked around an instant for a place whereon to lay her, and when I looked at her again found that her eye had become fixed on the side of the Virgin. Following its direction I saw the black cat crouching out of sight. Her green eyes shone like danger lamps in the gloom of the place, and their color was heightened by the blood which still smeared her coat and reddened her mouth. I cried out:

"The cat! Look out for the cat!" for even then she sprang out before the engine. At this moment she looked like a triumphant demon. Her eyes blazed with ferocity, her hair bristled out till she seemed twice her normal size, and her tail lashed about as does a tiger's when the quarry is before it. Elias P. Hutcheson when he saw her was amused, and his eyes positively sparkled with fun as he said:

"Darned if the squaw hain't got on all her war paint! Jest give her a shove off if she comes any of her tricks on me, for I'm so fixed everlastingly by the boss, that durn my skin if I can keep my eyes from her if she wants them! Easy there, Judge! Don't you slack that ar rope or I'm euchered!"

At this moment Amelia completed her faint, and I had to clutch hold of her round the waist or she would have fallen to the floor. While attending to her I saw the black cat crouching for a spring, and jumped up to turn the creature out.

But at the instant, with a sort of hellish scream, she hurled herself not as we expected, at Hutcheson, but straight at the face of the custodian. Her claws seemed to be tearing wildly as one sees in the Chinese drawings of the dragon rampant, and as I looked I saw one of them light on the poor man's eye, and actually tear through it and down his cheek, leaving a wide band of red where the blood seemed to spurt from every vein.

With a yell of sheer terror which came quicker than even his sense of pain, the man leaped back, dropping as he did so the rope which held back the iron door. I jumped for it, but was too late, for the cord ran like lightning through the pulley-block and the heavy mass fell forward from its own weight.

As the door closed I caught a glimpse of our poor compan-

ion's face. He seemed frozen with terror. His eyes stared with a horrible anguish as if dazed, and no sound came from his lips.

And then the spikes did their work. Happily the end was quick, for when I wrenched open the door they had pierced so deep that they had locked in the bones of the skull through which they had crushed, and actually tore him—it—out of his iron prison till, bound as he was, he fell at full length with a sickly thud upon the floor, the face turning upward as he fell.

I rushed to my wife, lifted her up and carried her out, for I feared for her very reason if she should wake from her faint to such a scene. I laid her on the bench outside and ran back. Leaning against the wooden column was the custodian moaning in pain while he held his reddening handkerchief to his eyes. And sitting on the head of the poor American was the cat, purring loudly as she licked the blood which trickled through the gashed socket of his eyes.

I think no one will call me cruel because I seized one of the old executioner's swords and shore her in two as she sat.

AMERICAN DREAM

by V. K. GIBSON

The man was sick in the head,
dangerous, sadistic, and psychotic.
They called him Silo Man,
because he had his finger
on the nuclear trigger.

It was when they dragged the farmboy across the wet snow to be shot that Secretary of State John Ryder decided to go over to the Russians.

The black and blue sky spat frozen spittle upon him and the rest of the U.S. Government as they stood together in the field. Nearby were the piecemeal structures which housed Congress, the Supreme Court, and the lesser agencies which had to make do with converted sheds and chicken houses.

Now the "Minutemen," former comrades of the traitor, pulled the bent-over prisoner into view and half walked, half slid him to the pole which had lately been erected.

"I'm sorry! You *hear* me?" shouted Tommy Grant.

Watching the boy dig trails in the slush, Ryder wished he'd followed his brother's example for once and stayed home—and gotten soused. He thought about the letter which young Grant's barely literate mother sent to the Court, how the dotty Chief Justice poured through his dusty tomes for "precedents." The President of the United States had refused pardon.

"I tell you I'm sorry!" the boy, now tied, wailed again. He wore much-patched, faded red longjohns—no use putting holes in good duds—and looked surrealistic under this sky, before this gathering. "I didn't tell them Reds nothin' 'cept the Silo Man's fit, an' no more crazy than ever!"

At that, every eye shifted to the tall, lean form of the Secretary of Defense—the Silo Man. He was the best-dressed member of the

assembly. His boots were otterskin, his coat and hat Russian sable; gifts of esteem from the Chairman of the U.S.S.R. himself. The man stood apart from the others with his youngest grandson, his jaw thrust out. He'd see the farmboy shot today.

Close by were fences of rusty barbed wire which ringed the single functional ICBM silo in the Continental United States. Even now, it was assumed, the Silo Man's wife and sons sat poised near switches that could—really?—send nuclear chaos to an undisclosed Soviet metropolis. This deterrent guaranteed the Silo Man's safe return to his subterranean haven.

The rag-tag firing squad came up. They were to wait a piece for the wizened Chaplain to pray. Before he could begin there was a loud disturbance at the back of the crowd—a woman, shouting—but her hysterical cries receded as if she were being carried away. Ryder knew it must be the boy's mother. He felt sick.

"Father God," began the Chaplain hesitantly. "We ask that you lend comfort in this hour to the soul of one who . . . who . . ."

He'd lost his way. He had been with the gypsy Congress since its flight to this refuge from the Third Provisional Capitol, a burg in Tennessee.

"Lord! Give us to see the Right. Guide our great nation upon its . . . course. Our great nation . . ."

Ryder sensed the old man was slipping into his interminable stock invocation. He went up and coaxed him back to his place.

After that they shot Tommy Grant. The bullets smacked into his chest, all but one, which took off the top of his face. The clumsily tied body broke away and flapped back into the spackled snow.

The crowd stood down, moving off to snug cabins. A few legislators ran after the Silo Man, who was already striding toward his comfortable bunker, waving petitions at the only American the Reds actually listened to. Special interests tinged the debate. The Speaker of the House had a powerful fondness for Trotsky Bourbon. The Democratic Whip had a pet social program: the outfitting of several warm-hearted milkmaids with new winter wardrobes.

Soviet Ambassador Andrei Amurski came up to Ryder.

"This episode was so unfortunate," he said sadly.

"Yes. And I hope it makes your commune leaders at our borders think twice about pumping other kids for information."

Amurski's lips wavered but didn't smile. Nearby they were

scooping up the body.

"My friend—please. No doubt you will remind me of how temperamental is the Secretary of Defense? That he hears 'Roo-sians' digging tunnels while he sleeps, on the way to pull him from his little hole? This sort of talk may frighten chil—"

"Tell that to the fallout victims at Minsk."

The Ambassador's face went blank. Then he recovered.

"False, sir. You have suffered misinformation. The ICBM fired from Arkansas twenty years ago did not even cross into Soviet air space. It fell harmlessly on Greenland. And all the other silos which our people later entered contained non-functioning missiles. All. They had not been properly maintained for decades and—"

"Then why do you keep our Silo Man in furs, comrade?" asked Ryder, smiling tiredly.

The other man shrugged. Ryder excused himself and went away. There was a time when he'd found these exchanges amusing, but now . . .

Damn them! They'd offered him a nice farm in Virginia, where his people hailed from, and a wholesome Soviet American family on hand to tend it and take care of his needs. There would be flowers in the spring, and little green onions and big, ripe tomatoes growing in the garden come summer. He'd hunt squirrel, rabbit, and deer when their blood ran clean in fall.

And Siloville?—A farce of old unclean blood.

Four days later, at dusk, Ryder met Amurski in the shed which housed the Ambassador's car. The Russian stood beside the antique Ford sedan and rubbed his gloved hands together. Now and then he'd look through the back window of the car at the humped shadows on the floor below the seat.

"What kept you!" he said, jumping as Ryder entered and manhandled the shed doors open.

"A last minute chore. Has my brother been quiet?"

"Yes. But, listen. Are you sure he . . . I mean, he seems totally insensible!"

The Secretary of State paused.

"He usually is, you know. Are you surprised he fortified himself for our little trip?"

That was a lie. He'd brought his sibling to this place and sat with him, sipping whiskey from a flask. Ryder's brother was always in favor of such outings, and hardly let a private moment

pass without his attaching a libation to it. This time Ryder slipped him a dose of narcotic.

Amurski wasn't reassured. Ryder imagined the agonies he'd passed through, waiting for the message which had come this morning: "Secretary Expected."

The Soviets were delighted to hasten the erosion of the all but defunct U.S. Government. It was thought, in Moscow, that the village of pretenders who had clustered here merely reinforced the delusions of that lunatic, the Silo Man. Defectors were courted and treated very well.

But now there was a second defector, and no time to seek approval for the addition.

"I wish that at least my aide might accompany us," said Amurski. "This is not the best time. There are reports of your farmers being outraged over the killing of that boy. One of *our* cars was stopped yesterday and its occupants harassed. And—"

"If it's just us probably no one will ask questions at the gate. We're only going down the road to break open a bottle with good old General Rostov. Right? Now, I think we should go."

The other man sighed and got into the car, behind the wheel. Ryder covered his brother with several quilts, standard articles for winter travel, then went to sit in front. Amurski drove the car through the town, twisting and turning along narrow, unpaved alleys, finally moving up to the main gate. A pair of Minutemen reluctantly came out from their warm hut and flagged them.

"Oh, you," said one to Amurski. "Who you got in there?"

"Good evening!" said the Russian with stilted cheer. "Here with me is my friend, your Secretary of State, the Honorable Mr. Ryder."

"Hah? Uh, hi, sir. Asshole of a night to be out, ain't it?"

Ryder forced a grin.

"We're driving out to have supper with the Soviet brass, and tip a cup or two of cider. They'll see us home in a few hours."

"Cider my ass," muttered one of the Minutemen, as they waved the Ford out.

The Ambassador exhaled ponderously.

"I wonder what the effect of your defections will be?" he mused. His hands firmly gripped the wheel as the car slid and shook.

Ryder turned his head and looked at the frozen, clodded road lit by the headlamps. The long-neglected trail was messy, and the

State Highway was no better. Full-grown trees grew where the median used to be, their roots kicking apart the pavement. He took some comfort in the fuel gauge: a full tank of Soviet gas.

Amurski turned on the radio and Tchaikovsky's "Fourth Symphony" rumbled and purred, turned down low. Ryder opened his coat for a while once the heater started to push the cold from the car, but re-buttoned it when they'd climbed the hill which overlooked Siloville.

"Stop the car."

Amurski looked at him in rather operatic fashion.

"Don't worry," said Ryder. "I just want a fast look back."

The Ford slowed and stopped and Amurski put it in park, leaving the engine running as he followed Ryder to the edge of the road. They looked down into the valley.

"But—something is burning!" said the Russian, pointing.

"One of the barns," murmured Ryder. "Or, if you prefer—The Library of Congress."

"What does this mean!" Amurski's eyes widened.

"It means. . . ." Then the American's voice paused. Finally, "It's simple, Andrei. I just hung one kerosene lantern right above another, so the one on bottom eventually exploded the one on top, and spread lots of paper—all that old parchment!—all around. The Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the letters of Franklin and Jefferson—whoosh!"

The ambassador seemed to be suffering a cardiac difficulty.

"Ahhh! You are mad! All of you—madmen! One day those treasures would have been—"

"Neatly displayed in Soviet Washington, with all the little commissars parading by?" finished the Secretary grimly. And then he laughed. The noise made Amurski recoil.

"Look!" said Ryder. "The fire's traveling. And speaking of that, we'd better get along. They might come after us."

The Russian was stupefied. Ryder put him back into the car and drove it himself. He turned up the radio. Now the station in Soviet Minneapolis was playing *Night on Bald Mountain*. Ryder twisted the dial up and rolled down the window, letting in frostbitten air. The shrill harmonies of witches in flight mixed with the barks of tire chains digging through frozen grey matter. Amurski winced and closed his wild eyes.

They drove on, with the Ambassador curiously deadened and the Secretary painfully alive, with Ryder laughing soundlessly and

the Russian whistling backward.

Dark rolling hills patched with farms and windbreaks rushed by. The trees were like lines of refugees, black and naked, coated with ice and snapped off at their extremities. The moon poked through the hangdog sky, revealing the pale geometry of farmsteads and brittle battlefields of ravished corn. Down side roads, isolated windows of houses glowed yellow, as if one candle were allotted to each family.

Ryder visualized these people having their spare suppers, then sitting near wood stoves to talk about when spring would crawl over the grey hump of winter. Little kids might play with useless telephones found in the cellar, calling up the Silo Man to ask if he was going to let loose his rocket. Perhaps the grownups discussed the goings-on down the road, where border farms were getting lend-lease tractors from the communes: "Them Roosians ain't so bad as all that . . ."

He imagined unwashed, overworked wives and husbands, smelling like men and women, coming together in the dark under patchwork comforters, heating blood and making babies, above and beyond history.

Lost to this, he didn't take note of lights on the road ahead till he was almost upon them. He braked the car and stuck his head out. A wagon, he saw, had been pulled across the way and bales of hay were piled around it. Two dozen or so people waited there in the glow of lanterns, as if for an appointment. One came along—a woman—and the rest followed. She moved up quickly and opened the car door so fast that Ryder almost tumbled out.

"You be one of them that kilt my boy!"

Her companions brandished farm implements: knives fit for castrating hogs, axes, scythes, the inevitable pitchforks. Ryder felt a rising urge to laugh out loud. But, remembering his benumbed brother in the back of the car, decided he didn't deserve those courtesies.

"You're . . . Mrs. Grant?"

"Kilt my boy!" shrieked the woman again.

They surged up and pulled them out. The Ambassador came to life, finding himself in the hands of very ugly Americans. He roared something in Russian, which made them pause, and in that time he looked about and figured things out. Then a transformation came over him. He seemed to grow in stature, expanding to the limits of Soviet pomposity—a survival instinct of the one-party

system.

"I am the Ambassador of the United Soviet Socialist Republics," he bellowed gravely. In this region, close to the border, he represented more authority than the U.S. Government some thirty miles away. "I quite sympathize with your feelings regarding the barbaric murder of the young man, and I assure you that my government has lodged a severe protest with—"

"Lookit!" shouted a man. "Look at the sky!"

Amurski cut off. In the west rose a flower of light, followed by rolling thunder! The radiance climbed and arched toward the muddy north, its glow and noise fading.

"Aieee!" screamed the Russian, launching himself at Ryder. "That fire you started must have burned the whole village and frightened the maniac of the silo! *He did it!*"

The American caught him in his arms. Then Amurski vibrated, as if something final were happening to his health, and the look on his face denounced a conspiracy of hardened arteries. His force melted around Ryder and into the night.

The mob ignored Ryder as he put Amurski into the Ford and drove around the barrier.

The awed people had forgotten them and were gazing at the sky. All of their days had been molded against the unyielding reality of the Silo Man's wrath, a stinger which—once used—could not be taken back.

The missile . . . to Moscow? Leningrad? The wilds of Alaska? No! Ryder prayed for it to raise a sunspot over the Kremlin! He pictured onion domes bursting like the filaments of a flashbulb. A vast, senseless pride swelled in him.

He reached the outpost of the Soviet camp and waited for the sentries. One of them tapped on the window and he rolled it down.

"What do you want here?" demanded the soldier.

Ryder gestured at Amurski.

"That's your Ambassador. I think he just died of a heart attack. I am . . . I'm John L. Ryder, Secretary of State of the United States of America!"

The Russians exchanged glances. Then one noticed movement in the back of the car. He opened the door and pulled away the covers. Ryder's brother opened his bloodshot eyes and giggled.

"And, who is this one?"

Ryder found that he could not speak. Time slowed and almost

stopped, like a tape which reaches its end but does not shut off. He felt the American Dream hovering at the edge of its history — *click*.

"Who is this one?" repeated the sentry.

And, since there was no one to announce him, Ryder's brother slurred the remote formula himself:

"Mr. S-Speaker . . . the P-President of the United States!"

BRASS

by DAVID J. SCHOW

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine . . .
and a mirror as terrifying
as the deranged beat of a lover's heart.

Part one of a two-part novella.

The lovemaking was just fine. Stabilizing. Perfect. The trendy medoc jug was a crimson third shy of empty; the sheets *had* been virgin cotton. The customary shower of votive candles had on this occasion been replaced by floating oil wicks. From their perches on a stylized *bonsai* of chrome, the wicks threw back tiny, star-filtered prongs of diffused white light. The air conditioner mumbled. The lovemaking . . . well, the sex had been terrific. The afterglow qualified itself as warm, comfortable, disorienting. The man on the bed hoped this feeling was destined to become a familiar one, a hallmark of *this* relationship with *this* woman now sleeping beside him. Perfect.

A green amplifier telltale continued winking at Grant Mantell from across the room, and he was content to just stare back at it from his lazy splay across his newly inaugurated bed. The tape reel was one of Jennifer's, various cuts of movie music she had dared him to identify without even giving him a chance at fair competition. The ten-inch reel had run dry nearly twenty minutes ago. Grant felt no digging urge to dash over and change it, or kill the machines, or anything. Apart from the new tape, Jennifer had showed up with an orgy of snackables—summer sausage, cheeses, chips, still-warm French sourdough bread—through which they had feasted shamelessly. Within arm's reach, a crumbling plug of cheddar cheese was nailed to a small cutting board by one of

Grant's carving knives. The blade caught some of the candle light, and he wondered if the frequency with which he contemplated the ease of potential murder—or suicide—was abnormal. Thoughts, blackly thrilling, never straying beyond the broom closet area of his mind, absorbed him.

He approved of his own casual control. *Good for me.* There were psychos in rubber bedrooms the world over who had somehow failed to acknowledge the sympathetic relationship cutting utensils had with food, who wound up making the Thanksgiving cutlery part of wifey's or hubby's anatomy. *Men were not meant to stick women with knives*—that was *funny*, God damn it, *funny* must still be worth something. Luckily, Jenny was asleep and therefore incapable of deriding the chauvinism of her partner's dumb postcoital philosophizing. Her right arm and leg were laced over him; her breath brushed warmly against his neck in a regularly cadenced rasp that was not quite a snore. The sheets were impossibly twined around and over and under, damp-dry patches cooling in the dark.

He raised his head, the bed gave an obliging little creak, and the snow-white Alsatian snoozing beneath the stereo shelf lifted its turretlike head attentively. The broad thick brush of white tail batted the carpeting in three hopeful thumps. When nothing happened he lowered head to forepaws with a dog-shrug and stared into the dark with that peculiar, patient resignation that made him such an affable companion. Jenny had brought Max, too. Max had gotten bored of snitching tidbits and so had flopped by the door to doze and listen while his masters made friction.

Carefully, conscious of Jenny's slumber, he stretched his arms backward to lace his fingers firmly through the intricate metal weave of the golden headboard. The bed itself was a wonder; thinking of it made him look naturally toward his other recent acquisition, the mirror. It hung on the wall nearest the left side of the bed, over the skinny corridor where his boots were unceremoniously dumped at bedtime. It was large enough—three feet on a side, requiring leaded screw-sets to hold its poundage against the wall by the apartment's beams—and gaudy enough for a whorehouse. The wide frame was of scrolled brass, inlaid with smaller idiograms, rather like the hood of an Indian incense burner. Grant's verdict had been to hang the thing in the most obvious place, next to the bed. Realistically, it was the only available space—an exterior wall with beams every three feet. That



sucker was *heavy*, but near the bed it was secure.

Inside the slightly canted sheet of silver, Grant could see himself, along with parts of Jenny and bounceback from the amplifier and candle lights. His hair was a riot. He considered himself a crowd face, with an Irish nose and deep-set, glittering eyes. Black eyes, so intent that one of the first things Jennifer had told him was "your kind of eyes make stupid people feel uncomfortable." That had been at their first lunch together, and from then on she had worked at helping him with his self-image. She was anything but insecure herself, and his deferral to her critical abilities was great for his ego. Thus, his carriage was not *masculine* (that would have been too simple) but *authoritative*. He was not movie-idol attractive, but with his character lines, what the hell difference did it make? And so forth.

It was a matter of perspective on oneself. *There, see?* He pursed his lips in the semidark. Thanks to tv commercials, nobody was happy; everyone was self-conscious and insecure. To such a cosmetically atrophied outlook, the goal of being handsome according to media rules was to end up in bed with a woman like Jennifer, he thought. It was the logic of commerce. He was outside it, totally, and here he was in bed. None of the stupid rules, therefore, were real. Jenny would have resented comparison to a brainless tv muffin, anyway.

He looked back at himself in the mirror a second time, scrutinizing. He squinted. He wrinkled up his brow. He bared his upper row of teeth. In the dim light, and through the cheesecloth fog of his own narrowed eyelids, he saw himself reflected back as a demon. Some kind of vampire. The light molded his imagination into a vulpine countenance, satanic and grinning, just a few feet away.

He fought to maintain the accidental illusion for a few more seconds, fascinated. He perceived the gargoyle-lines of the hungry face, saw the sharp slits of nostril and the pointed chin and the eyes, like glossy chips of obsidian. It was like a medieval woodcut of Lucifer rendered into glass and stone.

And it returned his gaze steadily, hungering. Someone had told the boogeyman under the bed to slither forth for feeding time.

He relaxed his facial muscles and there was silent pain. The reversed mirror image of the digital clock told him he had lain for more than five minutes with his face frozen into that bizarre rictus; five minutes had passed like thirty seconds. Now his eyes ached and his jaw was sore. A thin headache vein began to pulse

wetly away and he grimaced. The face in the mirror grimaced back. It was his own face, the one with the great character lines and the Irish nose—his wild Irish nose, he thought crazily. There was no monster stalking him from the glass, no visage sporting death's-head eyebrows arched up in black contrails, nor fangs dripping bubbly gobbets of saliva. It had been perspective and faint light, yes, and of course the medoc. A lot of it sat stubbornly in his bladder, but the alcohol fizzed away in his bloodstream with a red tingle. It reminded him of the way people got blitzed in pubs like the Hairy O or the Piece de Maurice, always winding up in the john and convincing their mirror-selves they weren't *really* drunk, before grinning like a fool and shuffling carefully out to rejoin the world.

After a moment of such roundabout contemplation (during which Max spot-checked the proceedings, and finding only more human frippery, worked on making the floor more comfortable) Grant thought he might like to try and make the demon come back for an encore. But what if he looked back up and the demon was already there, ahead of him, waiting?

He jerked his head up suddenly. A clean lick of auburn hair drooped across his forehead, simultaneously with that of the reflected Grant. No demon.

Somehow this did nothing to reassure him; he had been struck by the fancy and concentrated on it even harder. What if, someday, you were to glance into the mirror and see a malignant, demoniac version of your own face, meeting you eye-to-eye, unflinching? Smiling hideously under the awful brightness of a bathroom light, making movements you weren't making with your own face?

Dear God, what if it said something?

He glazed his eyes, the whites above the pupils becoming visible. The oil wicks seemed to intensify without providing any real light at all.

"My turn," he growled. "Now you get in the mirror."

A blackly exciting tendril of fear uncoiled in his stomach. His speech scared gooseflesh up along his arms, and the fine, light hairs there snapped to attention, prickling. He stopped to admire the terrorization he had wrought. Another second might have convinced him that a palpable threat perhaps existed a few feet away, in the mirror—a total product of his imagination. An English instructor at Cal State Northridge had once told Grant that he

possessed no imagination whatsoever. That was not what caused his peculiar exhilaration. His actions had the tang of supernatural defiance, like pissing in Satan's face and then daring him to do something about it. Wow.

He smiled then, broadly, idiotically, thinking that this must be what was meant by the term *enjoying yourself*. Here I am, enjoying my own self (and without masturbating, the Rodney Dangerfield imp in another quadrant of his brain was quick to add), and my reflection seems to be enjoying himself—*itself*—too.

Grant looked up to check. Inside its weight of brass, the glass remained implacable while his image stared back at him with an identically sheepish expression. *By Cromwell*, he thought with detached wonder, *I must still be a tad fuzzheaded*.

As though knocked rudely up from slumber by the leakage of stray brainwaves from this fantasy, Jenny stirred with a groan that hinted at her return to the domain of the living and the crazy. Her hair hung everywhichway in streaming black loops, and her eyes were slightly puffy with sleep as she rose on one elbow, mouth open, and caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Her face often pushed Grant into ruminations on the strange convergence of their lives. It always seemed surprising to him that Jenny was attractive, that he knew and *she* knew it especially, and that it was no big deal. Her face was not sculptured into the clean, perfect architectural flawlessness preferred by the purveyors of sterile fashion. Her mirror might have told another woman that her mouth was a tot too large and wide, that her chin was not well defined, that her eyes seemed too far apart. The concert of her facial components, however, certainly proved Poe's dictate that a true beauty was largely a matter of *strangeness of proportion*; making her face darkly compelling, rather than blandly pretty. That was as close as Grant could pin it, and it served. Her height matched his own six feet to the inch; that leonine accumulation of jet-black hair usually served to accentuate her altitude further, and when she wore heels it became impossible. But now, curled into him in bed, she did not appear even vaguely Amazonian.

Jenny looked up into the reflection of her darkly compelling face. "Yuck," she said. She covered her face with her hand and immediately parted the fingers so that a single agate-grey eye peered out for a second look. "Caught unawares again. With my pants down, to wit. So to speak." She yawned.

He glided his hand into her hair; indicated he was awake. He

tried to suppress a tiny belch, but it billowed up through his innards with a rumble. Why couldn't the burps or the anal thunder ever rattle forth when one's love partner was dead asleep? The eyeball swivelled toward him in mock reproach. "Excuse me."

"Oh, me too," said Jennifer, yawning generously again. "For falling asleep on you, literally, I mean."

"That's unconditionally okay."

"You're rather comfortable, you know."

"Thank you."

"What are you doing up there?"

"Staring," he said. "At the pretty lights. Making faces at myself in the mirror."

"Aha. Unbridled excitement in my absence, I see." She grimaced, trying to read the clock in the mirror, failing, then turning. "Have you been awake all this time?"

"Yep."

"Making faces for three hours?" she said as the digital box growled over to 4:02. "Since one a.m.?" When she became inquisitive her voice rose into an exotic register of inflection that almost classified as an accent. No one Grant had witnessed had ever believed her claim that it was straight Albany, New York, (whatever that classified as); they always counted on some foreign port lurking in her past to validate their conjectures of mysterious background or eclectic blood.

Grant yawned this time, nodding in response.

"Thrilling," she said deadpan.

"Yes, it was." He was not facing her. From there the conversation did not stop, rather, it became irrelevant. They ceased talking as though by telepathic agreement.

Under the hazed light the bedframe returned a golden aura as they rearranged themselves. Its brass was a bold but gentle presence in the room, like the fire of the oil wicks, or the silver and gold of the mirror and its frame.

Grant's head was angled sideways. He watched himself in the mirror, intermittently, until his eyelids became prohibitively heavy. Nothing peculiar happened.

But past this night, the first night Jennifer had passed in his new bed, he knew he would regard the mirror uneasily. It was a morbid idea, almost a touch paranoid, but he abruptly felt like the man who discovers his pretty tropical fish have teeth, and an appetite for fingers. When he projected this vague fear into the

future, his heart bumped faster and he thought his prospects for deep and cozy sleep to be lost.

Sleep came with almost absurd ease. He dropped off as if anesthetized and did not consider the mirror again until the following evening.

"Assuming you can trust any doctor in town farther than the distance between your nose and mine," Jennifer said around a mouthful of niçoise salad, "what was the verdict?"

A bow-tied waiter with ridiculously wide tortoise-shell rimmed glasses flounced past long enough to reheat Grant's coffee. Grant's eyes stayed on the curls of steam as he spoke. "Everybody else would have added, *you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to*. They tack it onto the end of their questions, like they think I'm going to start crying or something. But in the end your feelings add up to a lot less than their need to pry."

"Like, please pass the salt . . . you don't have to if you don't want to, but *I* want the goddamn salt—?"

"Exactly." He was pleased she had not misinterpreted his complaint, or taken personal offense. He speared three of the smallest homefries he could find on his plate, and forked them into his mouth. "You're right, though. All the lawsuits against hospitals and doctors around LA make me wonder a little bit. Anything expedient can be scribbled in on a death certificate if they're the least bit stumped, and we humble serfs will never be the wiser. But what they're settled on, as far as my father goes, is a hematoma. A little tumor full of blood in his brain. He keeled over in his living room and Mrs. Saks from next door found him in front of the fireplace. She peeked through a crack in the curtains; all the doors were locked. She hobbled back to her place and called the medics. He'd been dead almost a whole day when they collected him. A little sac swelled up with blood, and burst; he hemorrhaged like mad inside his own skull and just dropped dead. When he blacked out he knocked a candle off the mantelpiece; it burned some of the carpet before it went out. Mouin shag; that goddamned carpet was brand new the last time I was inside that house." He had stopped eating.

"Sounds like he might have lain there a lot longer," Jenny said thoughtfully, still chewing, apparently determined not to let him lapse into despondency despite their topic, which had to be dealt with.

"Yeah, well, paramedics are used to finding old folks who've been stiff and dead in their bathrooms for weeks, all bloated and gassy from—oop, sorry about that."

Across from him, Jenny's expression was that of a woman who thinks, but is not positive, she has just eaten a cockroach instead of a carrot slice. The dab of bleu cheese dressing on her lower lip looked obscene. After a second, her tongue swept it away and she swallowed hard, going for her water goblet. "Just stick to the pertinent stuff. Or else." She regarded the remainder of her food uncomfortably.

"I'm—never mind." Sickly grin. At least some of his usual humor was seeping back. "Mrs. Saks. Father once told me she was the neighborhood busybody. Used to water the lawn on the east side of her house for hours, so she could peep through his side window—she must've thought something pretty hot was going on inside. Father started keeping his curtains closed."

"Logical. Sensible."

"What's weird is that burn on the carpet. It wouldn't have made any difference if the house *had* burned to the ground. There's an empty lot down there now."

"No house?" She looked genuinely surprised.

"I met Father's legal chickenhawks two days after he died. Two locals and one appointed "personal representative" from San Francisco. Until then nobody bothered to let me know that I was required to witness the demolition of Father's house personally in order to qualify for my inheritance. Which, by the way, is paying for this lunch, so pick a dessert."

"Why, for heaven's sake? From what you said it was quite a place; all oiled mahogany and ornamental balustrades and stained glass windows. Haven't you ever wanted a palace?"

"First of all, I want my *own* palace, by my own hand. I can afford it now anyway. There are a lot of exquisite old houses down around Pico and La Cienega, true, but it just isn't my kind of neighborhood. Somebody connected with the corporation wants the property already, and I get the profit. Fine." He finished off his roast beef. "Next, nobody, including me and the lawyers, knows the rationale . . . except Father, who currently is not talking." He was still attempting to appear breezy and unconcerned whenever they circled back to the given of his father's death. The masque was not totally convincing; pain came at Jennifer in surges.

"That's where you vanished to a couple of weeks ago and

wouldn't enlighten me?"

"Now it can be told." He spread his hands. "The wreckers started half an hour before I got there. It got boring quick. The attorneys sweltered in their C & R suits. Then a large, hairy fellow shambled over to me and asked me what I wanted done with all the 'fuggin' antiques.' "

"Your father's furniture was still in—"

"There was no furniture. Empty house. The executors even had the light fixtures removed. They hauled away the fireplace, which was solid Etruscan marble and probably cost its own gross tonnage in gold doubloons. That house was as empty when my father was buried as my checking account was before he died." Again the strained expression, the brief silence. "Nevertheless, this turkey comes up with a sledgehammer in one paw and says the basement room is full of junk. I said what basement room; he looked at me the way a librarian does when he finds out you don't know what the Dewey Decimal System is. Was."

Jennifer pushed her plate away, scanned around and signalled for coffee. "Everybody forgot the bomb shelter."

"No bomb shelter. It was on the executor's list after *attic compartments*. No doors, no vents, no new brickwork or plaster. They pulled measurements of the exterior and only came up a foot or two short compared to the floorplan, so they assumed the basement they saw was all there was, until they started kicking the walls down and found—"

"A bed," she interjected. "And a mirror . . ."

"And a couple of boxes of old *Liberty* magazines."

Jennifer spooned a few drops of milk into her coffee, barely discoloring it. "Somehow I didn't think you'd paid for all that stuff. Even taking recent wealth into account, you should excuse the pun."

"I spent a few hernias getting it out and a day or so polishing. For your benefit."

"God preserve me—a romantic." She grinned.

"You'll pardon my recent unsociability."

To keep them both from abstracting into another clumsy silence she spoke immediately. "I understand; you needed some time. Why do you make it sound so unreasonable?"

He jumped in after her: "Don't apologize; that I don't need." *And now comes the part where you reach across and squeeze her hand meaningfully, or she yours, or some damn thing. To hell*

with it, he thought. If she really *did* understand it was unnecessary.

Fortunately, the waiter showed up to fuss briefly over them and provide distraction. In his wake Jennifer said, "It really is a stunning bed, Grant," with a private, evil smile. "Luxuriously oversized and heavy. It doesn't squeak and it's expensive and permanent-looking. Unusual. When you think of *brass bed* you think of those *bordello* things, you know, incredibly tacky. I love it."

"I've never seen one remotely like it, either. That's strange. If there's anything that ran against the grain of my father's style, it was that bed. He was strictly a Danish-modern, pure-functionalism freak, nothing ornate. He had his home maintained impeccably, but never decorated in the sense you or I would understand. Just a perfect, hollow, empty cavern of house, which is now gone too. I can't believe he wasn't aware of that stuff below him; I'm sure he probably walled it up down there himself. Because if it was there before him, he would have found it, noticed it, ferreted it out and mentioned it. He was painfully methodical. You don't capture the executive vice-presidency of Calex Corporation if you're not methodical, period."

"You sure it wasn't just a downstairs room that got . . . um, accidentally closed off?" Her eyes flirted with the dessert menu again as her question trailed away. "Boy," she said, shaking her head. "Said out loud like that it *does* sound pretty stupid. Unlikely. *Accidentally closed off.*"

"That leaves you with *intentionally* closed off, which strands me with a *why* either way. But there was no evidence of there ever being a doorway or access—just a niche of the basement, bricked up tight. No windows." Grant stopped to consider whether caffeine and sugar flash were helping his logic processes, and decided on another cup of coffee. "I wonder if the bed's name is *Fortunato*, or something?" he shrugged.

"Provided your father did not indulge his Imp to the extent of a brass bed like that one," she said (tossing his Poe reference back in his face, gleefully), "I doubt that he would run on to the stage of naming his furniture." She unclipped a Benson & Hedges from a flat silver case and fired up—she was the fastest draw with a lighter Grant had ever known, and so he ignored the boxed wooden matches on the table. Thin grey smoke trailed from her mouth as she spoke, now gesturing with the cigarette. "Okay, try this—it was there, walled up, when your dad moved in, and he

never knew about it. You said everything inside was moved out by special request; if he'd known it was there it would have been listed, no?"

She ordered fresh strawberries, to counter his request for chocolate torte so rich you could smell the lacings of brandy. "The bed seemed to suit that house," he said, slicing the tip of the brown, layered wedge away with a fork. "Overstated. Another case for it being buried in the basement all along. But when the wreckers checked the bricks, they said that although the wall wasn't new, it was about fifty years younger than the rest of the house. Which brings me back to my original conundrum."

"Tastes change, I'll wager," she said. "A month ago you didn't even know what a torte was." Her mouth enveloped a strawberry. Grant thought of Eve and the apple: *You talked me into it, kid.*

"Sure I did." He dropped into his redneck drawl: "Hell, ah seen torts gettin' arrested on Sunset Boulevard ..."

"You know what I mean. You admitted you didn't really know your dad's nature very well."

"He was an emotional isolationist."

"His taste in beds might have taken a turn for the eccentric. Or *away* from it. Just as his son's tastes in food have matured from cheap garbage to expensive garbage." She smoked and continued looking smug.

"Hold on. I didn't actually *eat* that stuff."

The memory of their first meeting filled in gaps of reference, and Grant's mind drew on it in the languorous way Jenny inhaled cigarette smoke. He might never have met her had it not been for a rare, unanticipated, masochistic gut-rumble on behalf of pure sleaze food. Traditionally, Grant forced such fare on himself about once a year, to remind himself how repugnant the consumption of fast-food sewage really was, and thus reinforce against the illusory economy buying such food represented when funds were low.

He had been slated to rendezvous with a friend, a projectionist *cum* English major at Northridge, for the purpose of roasting current movies over lunch. Their meeting had been bumped ninety minutes ahead, and Grant, anticipating food too eagerly, found himself with nothing to do but mosey into the closest, loudest conglomeration of neon and formica and order up a clownburger with all the slop, anemic string fries, and a shamelessly flat Pepsi in a go-cup. The percentages were heavily in favor of grease and ice. Sitting on a stone bench, he watched collegiate youth loiter past

bound for dipstick classes in Aerobic Video or Art and the Media Audience. His stomach recaptured sanity and the spicy garbage in the Happy Bag cooled, ignored. He tested a fry, and washed away his error with a sip from the watery Pepsi. He never got a chance at the rest.

"Max!" A shrill shout from behind.

He turned to see the Happy Bag kidnapped and making good escape time between the jaws of a stone-white Alsatian. The big dog was being yelled at by a tall woman wearing a jacket and boots of impeccably matched soft-brown leather and a cream-colored cowl-neck sweater. Black, flowing hair; lots of it. She stood her ground as the dog homed in on her; Grant stayed neutrally on the bench to observe her pet being admonished. Then, as a pair, they approached him. He forgot about her wardrobe and turned his concentration to those first few, precious seconds of new physical attraction.

The convergence of their lives was that easy, that random.

"My dear Max has what a Victorian novelist would call an 'unfortunate predilection' for fast food. I'm afraid he's done this sort of thing before." Max pulled a parade rest, his butt plunking obediently down near her feet, eyes never straying from the bag she had returned to Grant.

"I was in a suggestible state when I bought this stuff," he said. "I don't think I could've gone through with it." He unwrapped the burger as he talked. "Does he—?"

"Cast titanium stomach," she said, pursing her lips pleasantly and nodding approval.

Grant lofted the charred meat patty like a little frisbee. It vanished down Max's gullet with a chomp and a swallow; the dog, still sitting, looked at Grant with an expression that said all was correct in the universe.

Max seemed to prefer his fries cold, anyway.

"And now it seems I owe you a lunch—a proper lunch, at least, and not a dilemma between gastric death and food so obscene that in this state you could pull three-to-fifteen years for just sticking it in your mouth." She saw Grant smile at her and automatically begin his courteous denial. "I'll insist before you can protest," she added, on time. "Max would've let me know if you weren't okay."

Max's eyes, such a vaguely watery blue that they were nearly colorless, seemed to affirm this. It was all a con, Grant thought,

but Max wound up getting the Pepsi too.

Jennifer was new, therefore a party to the odd intimacy careful people generally allow only for strangers. Grant found he was able to edit his conversation around the death of his father and come up with few chuckholes. The subject arose before the first time they bedded down together, at Jenny's, and the conversations became impartial, healing things. They consistently surprised each other, and reveled in it. The sole secret of recent weeks had been the brass bed and mirror; these being sprung on her the night before. The coronation that ensued was pleasing for both of them. Now they sat lunching, much as they had on the day Max had caused their lives to cleave, now able to joke and rebound and distill some of Grant's befuddling sense of loss into a painless void where it could not poison him.

The desserts were used up.

"When people die the survivors always kick themselves for spending so little time with them," said Grant. "It's like a racial imperative."

"But negate the death," Jenny said as she worked on her third cigarette, "and nothing changes. No more time would be spent."

"My father was always with the corporation. *Always*. Until I was seven I thought 'Calex' was some little brother I'd never met, and wondered why Cal merited so much of my father's time." He shook his head to indicate he was not lapsing into Heavy Revelations; rather, he seemed to be putting the chain of events together for the first time, consumer-testing it on Jenny for stability of logic. "The only time in my life there was a real interface was when I turned eighteen and found out a junior-executive slot on the Calex board was being held for me. That was a big thing, for my father. Bigger than I knew."

"Uh-oh. Rebellious youth."

"I told him to roll and insert it. Bingo—no allowance. Calex was the Daddy Warbucks of Vietnam."

"Sounds like you were seduced by the publicity."

"I had as little social conscience then as now. It was a surefire way to rub against his grain, that was all I knew. And so began my odyssey through Real Life. Jesus, what a fucking idiot. The succeeding college generations, the ones who inherited the mantle of the protesters, would today chop off their balls and offer them for sacrifice if they could even get a toe inside the Calex door. For me, it's academic now."

"Jeez, you're making that sound awful." After a beat she was compelled by her nature to add: "My father would call it 'slicing it too thick to eat.'" Her smile stole the barb from the words.

"You're right—financial autonomy is something I can live with, probably even at the cost of my father. Though I hasten to add I don't look at it that way. What irritates me is that just now, after eighteen years of more or less standard 'family' bullshit, plus five years of requisite alienation, I'm left with this year, which is half over, plus the year before that and the year before *that*, to know my own father. Not nearly enough; we were just beginning to become friends, and he was just starting to open up, even to me. Now he's gone, prematurely, and I'm not even sure who it is that's just stepped out of my life. That hurts. I don't even know if he had anybody else besides his Calex cronies. He never remarried unless he kept it a huge secret, and he divorced my mother the year I was born. 1955."

"I was from one of those families with three older and two younger. Classic middle child. A phone call to my mother means forty-five minutes long-distance just to run down the list of relatives' names in alphabetical order."

"I've never been able to sympathize with that kind of bond," Grant said. He had had this conversation a few times before, with others, and always used the same sentence to mark his solo nature. "There was just me and mysterious Father, at opposite polarities. Till recently." His cup was dry; more coffee would set his teeth on edge. He dug for plastic with which to cover the check, which had been conspicuously delivered in mid-sentence.

"Be generous with the tip," Jennifer said. "We've run him threadbare, the poor dear. Twenty percent; you can afford it."

"Would you like to see the property?" he asked abruptly, feeling that he would not have asked her a day earlier, but now it was fair to involve her if she consented. "I have to pop in to see Father's doctor; it's on the way. Hm?"

"You would have to ask me *today*," she said as the check tray was swept away. "I've got an appointment with Toby Wolff at two, and yes, I *did* mention this to you last night before we got insensate. Maybe some newspaper ad stuff; maybe a billboard or two. He wants to shoot mostly bathing suit stuff. He's already offered to do nude stuff on the cheap. I figured I could get you to tag along; that way you and I could get some good, professional nude shots, inexpensively, without any laying on of hands

by Toby. He is a pro but it's been known to happen; I think it's backlash against most of the other good LA photographers being terminally gay."

"Yes and no," Grant said. "If you can fend him off today without jeopardizing your sessions, I'll go with you on the return trip."

"Deal. No problem."

"Meet me back at the apartment this evening? Whenever you get done?"

"How am I supposed to do that if I don't know what time you'll be done?"

He suspected she knew the answer already, but dipped into his coat pocket with a flourish regardless. Between his fingers was a shining-bronze, newly machined key. "For you."

Her expression went just slack enough to please him; it only lasted a second. Very seriously, she said, "Does this mean that you and I have become an 'item,' sir?" And took the key to his apartment, wrapping it tightly up in her fist.

"God, that's the first time I've ever done anything like that," he said in a slightly stunned voice. But inside he felt roughly the way good old Max must have after wolfing down his burger.

It was impossible for Grant to miss spotting the old woman as he swung his Pinto into the wide, curving promenade of Avalon Circle, just south of Pico and inside the buffer zone of Century City. She was standing in the center of the empty lot at Number 307, where the demolition had occurred, on the brink of the pit that formerly had delineated Montgomery Mantell's basement. Her arms were akimbo against a billowing paisley dress that went neck to ankles. Grant slowed to stop at the curb as she turned like a cat caught in a garbage can. She had wire spectacles, a granny bun, broad, rounded shoulders, and massive breasts. Grant wondered what sort of ancient foundation garment held such a boldly maternal chest in check.

When she saw him stop, she crossed herself furtively and hustled off the lot with surprising speed for her bulk, bee-lining for a cottage that had been spared the hyperthyroidal development of most of the court's adjoining houses. It looked to be a curt, stringently maintained one or two-bedroom place, in the midst of castles with octopoid wings that nearly spilled into Avalon Circle from their own lots; a commuter crunch of mansions.

Bam. Only after her front door slammed pointedly did it occur

to Grant that this was Mrs. Saks, the nosy widow. He stayed in the pilot bucket of the Pinto for a few moments, trying to sort through his thoughts amidst the heat shimmer and the stink of mown summer grass. He was glad Jenny had not ridden shotgun; to have her around all the time meant no room for judging whether the episodes of his life he had begun baring to her in blurts were credible, or prudent. They were still relatively new to each other, recently unwrapped, and had within the last hour agreed to advance their relationship to a more tricky, unstable stage.

Now his palms were finally damp.

He kicked out of the Pinto, stretching, causing his spine to crackle, and crossed onto the lot he now owned, heels sinking briefly into the humid, yielding turf. The sign was conspicuously new, and proclaimed in loud red characters ANOTHER ONE FOR SALE BY MCCOY AND TANNER, with three exclamation points and three phone numbers for inquiry. Grant figured McCoy and Tanner must be pretty loud red characters, themselves.

By contrast, the destruction had been scrupulously neat. It was as though a UFO had swooped down to zap the Mantell house, leaving a cleancut template of lawn whose brick sidewalks wound up to a floorplan-shaped rectangle of turned earth. No debris was scattered through the grass, which was still lush and green with the phony cinematic intensity seemingly endemic to the pampered lawns of the West Coast. McCoy and Tanner's banner was planted at the head of the lot, and looked like a lonesome sentry.

When Callex did not have him globe hopping, this was the place, he thought. The place where the senior Mantell spent an abnormal amount of his valuable executive time alone, with the curtains drawn against nosy neighbors. Concealing a woman, perhaps? Several? There were no cohabitants, concubines, or compatriots Grant had known of, not for any legally significant length of time.

While he circumnavigated the house-shaped plot, he saw the basement and foundations were now just a depression of fill dirt. When he looked toward the cottage across the way, he saw a pasty white face duck behind an embroidered drape.

For several moments he stood with his hand on McCoy and Tanner's sign, like a hunter posing with a kill, hoping for some kind of sympathetic vibration from the earth. None came. He realized that he would probably never return to this place. Calls from several hemorrhoidally polite minions of Callex middle

management had already come in regarding the disposition of the property—calls he had not yet bothered to return. He felt nothing for the house, either, but reckoned that the few minutes he had spent standing here alone had been the real eulogy for his father. It felt correct. Montgomery Mantell would call for a moment of silence, and then get on with the business of living.

There was literally nothing here for him anymore. He walked up to the lip of the excavation one more time, idling. This time the glint of metal in the topsoil caught him. Near what had at one time been the top of the basement's east wall, he bent and collected a strand of rosary beads in his fingers. He suspected it was a rosary, having identified one perhaps twice in his life. He lifted it and blew dirt crumbs through the gaps of the worked medallion twirling from one end, which at first he thought to be a Star of David.

It was three four-pointed stars inside a ring, staggered in rotation to look like a sunburst design, with a smaller ring as the core, and it appeared to have been worked from pewter. It gave gently beneath the pressure of his fingers. He examined more closely, still blowing motes of dirt away. He saw the engraving on the flip side of the half-dollar-sized disc.

Lines and circles hammered precisely into the thin circlet. Boxed circles; others three-quarter boxed, all outwardly random, yet purposefully intricate. They lent texture to one side while the obverse was polished and nickless—Grant though of photo negatives; the emulsion side versus the shiny side. It all depended on which side you had up.

The designs were very much like those graven in minute detail into the brass frame of the bed and mirror he had just trucked into his apartment. He looked toward Mrs. Saks's house, and saw her face dip out of sight again.

That decided him.

When it became clear that he would not vacate her porch, nor stop ringing her buzzer, Mrs. Saks cracked open the door instead of calling the law. Grant soon found out why.

"I think you dropped this out there, ma'am," he said, feeling absurd, as though he were playing Huckleberry Finn, putting on manners. He held out the rosary and medallion.

She peeped out, said nothing, allowed the door a few more cautious inches. Her glasses distorted her eyes, making them look to Grant like the view through the wrong end of a thick glass

loup. She canted them back on her reddened nose to squint at him. The door opened a few more inches. He could now see one broad foot, torturing a frayed house slipper just beneath the hem of the paisley dress. Her tight bun of hair, including all the flyaways, was the iron-blue tint of a gun barrel.

"Uh—you must be Mrs. Saks," he got out, teeth locked together. The silence was suffocating.

Inside, she shifted her bulk and Grant saw the foot in the doorway expand under the pressure, the slipper growing taut. My God, there was a good eighteen or nineteen stone inside that flimsy dress. Of that, there was at least twenty pounds of bosom. Thirty.

"You're of his blood," she said, in a voice that came from the very back of the throat and dried on the way out. Her eyes behind their half-inch density of glass checked him out again, head to shoes, and sent the input to her brain for processing. "His blood is yours. I can smell it." Her face was puffy, as if slightly inflated, and florid. Grant imagined her heart laboring to flush the arteries in her massive corpus with blood and keep the crimson high in her face. "But you have my string." Fat hands with short, stubby fingers drifted up to cover her mouth in slight confusion. Her eyes seemed to swim into focus, suddenly, and her tone humanized from that of a mummified haridan to a simple, but concerned matron. "You have it in your hands. How can that be, boy? Tell me."

"You dropped it on my property," he said, resisting the urge toward sarcasm. "In your haste to leave."

"I was afeared. But you're not who I thought you to be; I kenned a new one, a fresh one, a renewal of the evil." She watched the words have the effect she calculated on Grant's expression and stabbed an open palm toward him before he had time to react. "Give me it," she insisted.

"No." He knew to hesitate, just now, would be to stumble. "It was on *my* property. If you can explain to me what you're scared of, I might give it to you as a gift."

Her eyes narrowed, were almost swallowed by sunwrinkles. For a beat he tried to appear rational but unmovable, then he conceded to the instinct that told him threats might just as easily make the old woman clam up or, worse, become more cryptic. He had blundered onto touchy, arcane ground, and needed to know more—information he could not specify, like the unknown

crossword puzzle key that will unlock eight more hidden words. If the medallion was used as some sort of talisman against a real or imagined evil connected to his father, then in her eyes he was probably the agent for some black ruse. A concession became a good gamble . . .

"No," he said, extending the medallion so it twirled, shining, on the end of the unwinding rosary. "I'm no good at blackmail, Mrs. Saks. Take it—it's yours. But tell me why you think my father's house was evil. Obviously you wouldn't be so scared of losing this if it wasn't?"

She snatched it, stepping one thunderous step forward to capture it in both pawlike hands. Her gaze never left him, still suspicious, and he did not budge.

Finally she said, "'Tis not a trick, then."

"I'm afraid that's a little too sophisticated for me."

She relaxed another notch, taking her eyes off him for the first time and moving across the porch to stare toward the vacated lot, hands steady on the painted wood of the porch balustrade. "Air's a mess," she observed. "Stinks. Stings the eyes and parches the gullet some."

"Smog's bad because of the heat." He half expected her to trot out lemonade to seal their truce.

"'Tis the carbons. Poisons in the very air; some you can't see." A short, disinterested silence ensued, then she turned on him like a carousel on slow revolve. "I've been rude to you with no cause. Not even thanking you for returning my string." She moved back toward the door in vast, arthritic strides, her weight creaking the porch planks.

"Wait. My father's house—"

"You're not touched by the sin, thank the Lord," she said, shaking her head in judgment. "Best for you to leave it lie. The place be taken now; it can't do no more harm neither." Confidentially, proudly, she added, "I throwed salt over the tilled ground meself, through the new dawn. Two containers of Morton's."

"The house isn't all gone," he said. "Not yet."

"Then you'd best destroy whatever's left," she said with grandmother certainty. Grant felt scolded. "Fire cleanses."

"No." *I'd need a smelter, for God's sake.* "It would take a long time. You can help me today."

"I know protection. *They* wanted to touch me; oh, how they wanted to silence me, trying temptation when the yellow failed.

But I knew protection then, and learned more since." She cocked a plump thumb toward the threshold of the front door, and the hex sign evenly painted above. It was a larger clone of the medalion design. "That prevents entry. This—" she patted the medalion, now stowed in a flapping-sail pocket of the dress, "—prevents personal harm. I laughed in the faces of the demons, and I walk the Earth yet. Godliness can still triumph."

"Demons . . ." It was not a question. It was dull repetition. His mind swam.

"They worshipped the Goat. Consorted with demons—fornicators, blasphemers. The Horned One took them all, all but your father. He forestalled somehow, made some pact of blood, gained some engine of protection. But he was taken all the same. Just took longer, was all. No offense."

Mrs. Saks was as crazy as a gnat in a turbine.

"Who? What others?"

"Maybe the Spilsbury murders was before your time," she said, squinting at him keenly.

It was one of Hollywood's meatier scandals, back in the days before Vietnam made television so bloodthirsty, when such things were confined to the enquiring poop tabloids Mrs. Saks no doubt took stone cold seriously. "I've heard of it. Movie people slaughtered by cultists, like the Manson thing, but earlier. Late fifties—early sixties."

"Nineteen and fifty-nine it was."

"The Horned One waited twenty-three extra years to kill my father?" A smile converted itself into a contortion of the neck muscles.

"Time is nothing to the Dark Lords."

"Why my father? This doesn't—"

"To succumb to temptation is nothing new. Look to history, boy. You'll recognize evil if you keep a clear eye."

I read that once in a fortune cookie. The Dark Lords, my little brown eyeball. Rather than follow his impulse to attack the old lady's bizarre claims from all vantages at once, he decided to just fly away. There really *was* nothing here for him.

"Hang back," she ordered, anticipating his leavetaking. "You'll go now from here, and scoff at the visions of a foolish old woman. Your eye is clouded already. Hang back a second." She waddled back into the cool dimness of her lair. Grant clocked off time for the slowness imposed by her own girth, impatient now

to be shut of this lunacy, but obligated to finish up what he had begun by ringing the bell. Stupid.

She returned, presenting him with a lump, inside of brown shopping-bag paper, fuzzy with handling. It was about the size and weight of a full soup can.

"Your father died with this in his hand."

He tore open the paper quickly, too eagerly. It was a fat candle, black, greasy to the touch. The wick was charred.

"I nicked it. The ambulance boys didn't mind none. You take it. You'll see." Magnanimously she announced, "I think your father renounced the left-handed path. He only did so too late. There are greater sins, in God's eye."

Debate would not do, so Grant merely backed off the porch with the candle, feeling foolishly like a yokel with a wet-ink deed to Brooklyn's most infamous bridge. He tossed back a cursory thanks and would not have steered around a litter-grubber on Hollywood Boulevard any less. His escape was in hand.

"I wish you well, boy. I hope what you learn doesn't lay heavy on your soul. Soon enough, you'll see. I'll do a fetish for your good luck, if my feet don't need a sitz bath tonight." She crossed herself again.

All he would acknowledge was that the old woman seemed to be talking to herself as he left. He headed straight for the Pinto; did not glance back.

His opening line—when he saw Jennifer waiting on his sofa, wound thickly up in his blue terrycloth bathrobe—was, "A bottle of diCristefano's says my day was weirder than yours."

"Fool's bet," she said. "Bottle's already on the counter." She dropped his current *American Film* into a slack little tent shape on the coffee table. "So tell. You have to go first." Her bare feet, still pink and warm from the shower, were braced against the table. From the distance her robe had surrendered, Grant assumed her clothing was piled in the bathroom. He left a brushing kiss on her neck; she smelled fragrant and clean, and that made him aware of his own stickiness and stiff neck. He loved the bouquet of her hair; the masses and handfuls of glossy black exuded an aroma intoxicatingly her own.

"I am profoundly glad you're not one of those women who are compelled to paint their toenails," he said from the kitchenette. "Don't ask; it's probably illogical." He uncorked the dry, musky

Red and passed two bowl-shaped goblets through scalding water. Through their first glass he told her most of the saga of Mrs. Saks.

"Sounds like an ancient curse on your bed and mirror," she concluded, wagging an eyebrow. "Case closed." Pause. "That old lady'd been spying on your dad for—what? Twenty-five years? Thirty? Jesus."

"Unbalanced, sure . . . but what conviction. And she was definitely interested in salvaging my soul from the big bad demons, or ghosts, or whatever."

"She push any tracts at you?" She hesitated, almost crushed an impulsive thought, then let it out: "I'm not trying to match you weirdness for weirdness," she said, knowing that to begin with an apology was to exonerate nothing. "But you tell me whether this is stupid or not."

"I'm not laughing," he said, with a patient smile.

"Okay." She squared her shoulders; inhaled deep. "I was, how you say, disrobing a while ago, in the other room—you know how shooting lights make you sweat, and I was pretty gummy and cranky. When you're near that mirror, you can't help but watch yourself in it. Like something might change if you don't keep an eye on it. And I started freaking out, there in the bedroom, totally by myself, because I got the idea that it was really the other way around—the mirror was watching *me*. I mean personally, as if it was a one-way peep glass with a pair of horny Feds on the flip side, breathing evenly and watching me strip." She went for her cigarettes. "Now, I was taking it off for the Wolf earlier, and I don't get nervous when *his* eyeballs try to gobble me up at ten thousand RPMs; you tend to lose that kind of self-consciousness when you pose. But I couldn't stay in the bedroom. Not alone. I actually started shivering. The next step, I'm sure, would've been seeing things in the mirror."

"Boogey-persons," said Grant.

"God knows the *bathroom* mirrors weren't freaking me out." She shook her head in semi-exasperation, a sanity-asserting gesture. "I rolled out of there, toweling off, consciously averting my eyes from the mirror. Can you believe that?"

"I can't laugh," he said distantly, "because it gives me the creeps too—just as vague. The other night . . . I can't really articulate the feeling. But it unnerved me."

"Hmm. *Caveat emptor*." She motioned for a recharge.

"I didn't *buy* anything," he sulked. I propose you and I confront this dumb phenomenon together, and see if our Haunted Mirror has the balls to freak out more than one person at a time. Where's Battling Maxo?"

"Around—I'm surprised he didn't come out when—"

She stopped then, because they could both hear the dog growling.

"He was camping out by my clothes," she said. "Near the foot of the bed."

They moved together.

Max's ghost-white form was easily visible in the dim bedroom. His coffin-shaped head was fixed low, defensively, his black lips skinned back, his tail motionless. He stood aggressively between them and the mirror on the wall. He growled at the mirror, making a steady and thoroughly ominous basso noise of warning. His hindquarters rippled to spring and defend. Or attack. In an unsettlingly targeted way, Max's reflection was growling at *them*—directly at them.

When he began barking angrily at the glass it nearly launched them both up to cling from the ceiling light fixtures.

"Max!" Grant shouted. "Max, God damn it, what is it?"

It broke the spell. Max turned to them with an almost apologetic little whine, then jogged over for congratulations.

"Good puppy," Grant said, rolling his eyes at canine dumbness for Jennifer's benefit. In the mirror, he watched his own reflection scratch Max's radar ears. "You show 'em what a badass you are."

"Big jerk," muttered Jenny. "You scared the crap out of me." She forced a brutal little smile, and said, "*Good dog*" with suffocating sarcasm, and then sighed.

"Tell you what. You sit on the john and drink while I grab a shower. If Max wants to play guard dog, fine."

"You mean you're not going to admit how *weird* that was?" Frank incredulity, now.

"Not as weird as Mrs. Saks," he said, trying to move through his bathroom routine nonchalantly. "And not as weird as the rather awesome Dr. Axel Byrd." He yanked a huge bath towel down from the cabinet; all others strung about the bathroom were still damp. His smile toward Jenny and Max was an honest one, but he was aware of consciously forced reassurance: "It's too bloody easy to overinterpret this stuff. You wind up like Mrs. Saks, with her talismans and stacks of old scandal sheets."

Max padded off to case the kitchen, tail drifting lazily with his stride. Jenny glared after him, then at the large mirror. "He always agrees with you ..."

The mirror did nothing but hang on the wall and reflect their lovemaking. This time the paradox struck him.

If anything (he would have thought, normally), tonight's incident would have preoccupied them both in bed—the uncomfortable reminder was hanging right beside them and refused to be ignored. As tired as they both had to be—he from a crushing day cruising the LA smogscape to talk with oddballs like Mrs. Saks and Dr. Byrd, she from the photo session at Toby's (the one other such shoot Grant had been around for had exhausted her)—the act of climbing into the lush arms of the monster brass bed seemed to flush him with urgent adrenaline. He could feel it affect Jennifer. Her eyes irised to the dark grey of thunderheads. Light, clean perspiration dappled her before they even touched; Grant caught the bouquets of musky need, of feral hunger. She not only wanted him, she lusted for him, and his heart rate jumped up from double, and he plundered her, and she drained him. The light banter that helped to endear them was left in the living room; here was a sexual echo effect, power given and power received, a dangerously new exchange, dangerous because it seemed to obliterate some of the humor and caring that normally followed them to bed. She pulled him into her as though she was starving. His body came alive to the nerve endings, and in that starting-gun instant he cared about nothing but taking her.

The mirror watched as they slept, woke, made love again, slept, talked as before. It watched.

The wine was gone and Max was snoozing before the topic of Dr. Axel Byrd was actually addressed.

"A big guy, gruff, stout, barrel-chested. I expected a sterile Aryan type for my father's doctor. What I got was a bearded Viking in a doctor suit. It was a little surreal." He shifted uncomfortably. Jennifer was entrenched on the mirror side of the bed tonight, and that stood disturbingly at the edge of his thoughts, as though they were aboard a life raft and a random toss of the boat would flip her, still half-awake, into a sea turbulent with sharks. He watched his own feet in the mirror, abstracted.

"I suppose he wasn't apologetic?" She yawned, turned her back to the mirror, snaked an arm around him.

"Terse at first." Actually, Dr. Byrd had somehow divined that

Grant's questions about his father's health were standard and perfunctory. He had waited, patiently, for the gist, his replies crisp and dull as he outlined the senior Mantell's assorted minor distresses, shrugging them all equally—a little justifiable high blood pressure, a false-alarm ulcer, a brief problem sleeping.

It had all seemed a burden of trivia to Dr. Byrd; no big deal.

"Your father phoned me once, bursting with questions about narcolepsy and coma."

Abruptly his throat felt like it was trying to swallow a golf ball. "Coma I know about, but—"

"Ah, you've seen that dreaded film, I suppose." The huge shoulders rolled, the encompassing hands dangled between his knees in the overburdened desk chair.

"But narcolepsy—isn't that sleeping sickness?"

"More properly summed up by the term 'sleep attacks,'" said Dr. Byrd. "As in heart attacks, or attacks of gas. They can occur anytime, anywhere. A person with bona fide narcolepsy is capable of dropping into a very deep sleep state without warning, and during any activity—driving, sex, playing basketball." He swept a clearing between beard and mustache and inserted a grey stick of Wrigley's Spearmint gum.

"My father?"

"Claimed he had been oversleeping. Many questions on what a 'normal' amount of sleep time was. For him I estimated six to eight hours; that didn't satisfy him. Even at six you're spending nearly a third of your life in bed, semiconscious or unconscious. For a corporate eagle like your father, the idea of too much sleep would've been very frustrating. Less time for work, you see. He would become agitated at the idea, tax himself even harder—more wear and tear on his metabolism."

"Was he actually sick?"

"Apart from the development of the tumor, nothing. I'd say it was very easy for him to focus his work stress on his sleeping habits. But psychology isn't my field."

It's probably nothing, Grant thought. *Yeah, that's what they say in the movies, "It's probably nothing," right before they get eaten by a giant cockroach.*

Up, down, around, ran the gentle curve of Jennifer's waist in the mirror, a fold of sheet cutting just below the two indentations in the small of her back, like a toga in a posed picture. Beyond it, his reflection.

"So then?" she said.

"So then he booked me for a physical examination next week. I didn't protest; I'm overdue, I guess." He ran his palm along the smooth warmth of her hip. "He seemed privately pleased that he managed to trade one Mantell for another, as though I'd just go into the file in my father's folder or something." He continued to stroke her reflexively. She mumbled and snuggled in tighter.

"Hey?" he said, realizing she had slipped away. No reaction. He kept caressing her while his treacherous eyes instantly sought the mirror. It's panorama was nominal.

First there was his father's death and the hint of narcolepsy, or some other sleep affliction. Plus the mirror—brass encircling a lens backed by silver ... oh yes, vaguely malignant somehow. Mrs. Saks and her hex signs. Blasphemers. Fornicators. Those were the strings; where in hell was the common knot?

His morning coffee mug was still on the night stand, the one closest the mirror. He craned to see and saw the coagulated brown dregs, like a crust of blood. He supposed he really should wash the dishes more often than once per week; chances were he'd dump fresh-brewed on top of the scum and dust without even rinsing the cup tomorrow morning.

Something moved inside the mirror.

He fought not to see it from the visual periphery, tried to keep contemplating his stupid coffee mug, stubbornly, until he realized that it was merely Max, bopping back into the bedroom with the arrogant, hipshot stride of a *pachuco* on Hollywood Boulevard.

And abruptly, comfortingly, he felt that Max would warn them if the mirror was plotting anything weird. Animals knew.

Sleep came easier, though he kept thinking of sleep as a symptom. No, he was simply bashed from the day.

Or maybe he wasn't exhausted. Not technically, not for real ...

He finally fell asleep, and for a few hours found peace. Then the granddaddy of all nightmares smashed into his mind head-on, like a freight train vaporizing a prairie dog transfixed by the highbeams. There was nothing he could do.

To be continued.

Leaving

by DARRELL SCHWEITZER

The train lurched, and he sat in darkness.
When the lights came back
the commuters and the punks had disappeared,
and there were more people
like the bag lady, crumpled and discarded.

It was a fantasy he'd had for years, of just chucking it all and walking out of his life. When the time finally came, the action was surprisingly easy.

He rose from the dinner table, his plate still half full before him, shrugging off the latest round of invective in the latest running argument with his wife, and while she gaped he calmly went to the closet for his coat.

"I'm going out," he said. "Just out."

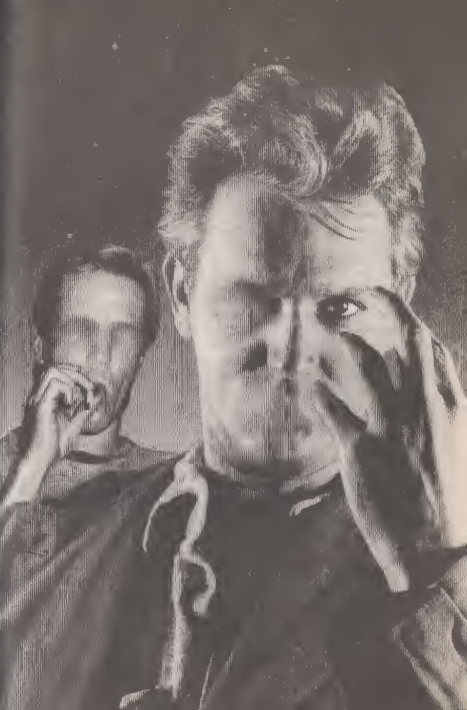
Leaving. Out of the apartment, down the stairs, onto the street. The night air was chilly and damp.

He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, staring up at the Empire State Building, lit up blue tonight. A gang of kids in mohawks and plastic ran by, jostling him, shouting something. Already he found it hard to remember his wife's name. His past fell away like an unwanted, heavy cloak.

He began walking. He thought of a stone just beginning to roll down a steep slope, scattering gravel. It was like that, as inevitable and easy as that, as he wandered through the damp October night beneath the brown overcast, understanding nothing, caring about nothing, merely moving.

Leaving.

Later, he found himself on the subway without any memory



of boarding; but there he sat in the middle of a crowded, roaring graffitimobile surrounded by late commuters and more kids in punk outfits and black teenagers with radios the size of suitcases. At the far end of the car a filthy, scraggly-haired woman in a coat much too heavy for the weather muttered something into a stuffed shopping bag on the floor in front of her, talking, then listening as if the bag were answering back.

The train lurched, and he sat in darkness. There must have been several stops before the lights came back on. He found it hard to pay attention. Everything was so pleasantly blank, the world around him fading into a gentle buzz, like the first stages of a good, soothing drunk. But in time he could see again, and he noticed that the radios were gone, as were the commuters and the punks, but for one gaunt, exhausted man in leather and studs who seemed much too old for that sort of getup. There were more people like the bag lady, old, soiled, crumpled up, and discarded.

Again and again the train lurched and bumped, and the lights went out, then came back on. The metallic groan was like . . . like something he'd seen in a movie when he was a boy, in *Jason and the Argonauts*; the metal giant Talos grinding slowly to life.

The odd thing was—and he was sure of it now—that every time the lights went out then came back again there would be more people in the car. He ran a little test, carefully watching the empty seat across from him. It happened again, the lurch so violent he had to grab a pole to remain where he was. The lights merely flickered, but the seat was filled by a man about seventy with a sagging face and a drunkard's nose and a woman twenty years younger, huddling in a man's overcoat, her hair in curlers and her feet in bathroom slippers. There had been no stop. The two of them had appeared out of thin air.

Stranger still, he didn't find this hard to accept. It was no more than the rest. He was somehow on a special train, or a train that had become special once the last of the commuters and punks and radio-toting blacks had gotten off; a special train reserved for people who had let go of their lives like barnacles dropping off a ship's hull, trusting themselves to the darkness and the currents and the depths.

He could accept it for a while at least, and he rode for at least an hour while he studied the faces of the passengers around him and saw the suffering, the endless little agonies in those eyes,

the weariness that now, inexpressible, was coming to an end. That was when he concluded that he wasn't one of *these*. His life hadn't been easy, but he wasn't like the bag lady or the drunk or the emaciated Spanish man who smoked one cigarette after another, for all that his left cheek was half eaten by cancer. No . . .

So he stood up and walked to the middle of the car.

"Hey," he said aloud, turning one way, then the other. "I think there's been a mistake. I don't belong here. I'll just get off at the next stop. Sorry to bother you. No offense intended, but—"

Only there were no stops. Again the train lurched and the lights went out, and there were more ragged people on board than there had been. No one paid him the slightest attention.

He went over to the doors and peered out, watching the dark concrete wall of the tunnel whiz past. Then he turned around and forced a smile.

"Where're we going anyway? *Hell?*" Still no one responded and his smile faded. He leaned back against the door, rubbing his eyes. He sighed. He was sure he could sing a Gilbert and Sullivan number in the nude and no one would notice. He laughed bitterly, then sang the line from the commercial:

"I . . . love New York!"

"Oh, shut up, mister, will you? Just shut up."

It was a young voice, and that startled him. He turned halfway around and saw a girl staring at him sullenly from a seat nearby. She couldn't have been more than sixteen. She wore faded blue jeans, but good quality shoes; a shapless coat that could have come out of a rummage sale bin, but rings, a gold necklace, and a digital watch. She might have been his own daughter, if he and his wife had ever gotten around to having a daughter.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

From the look on her face he instantly regretted having said that, just as he had one other time, in a trivial incident that somehow haunted him, when he'd been at a dinner and, straining for a witticism, had made a completely stupid joke about a Vietnam vet's war wounds and gotten that same My-God-What-Kind-of-Creep-Is-This expression from across the table.

The girl began to cry, sitting with her hands in her lap. He didn't say anything, because anything he might say now would only make things worse. He merely sat down across the aisle and down two seats, and watched her crying, wishing that he could make his mind blank out again, as it had that first instant when

he'd left his apartment. But it wouldn't. It was like wishing oneself to sleep, concentrating so hard on the idea that sleep is impossible.

Then the train finally did come to a stop, far more gently than New York subways ever did. It took him a while to realize they were no longer moving; the doors had opened silently. People were already shuffling out before he noticed.

He got up, followed the crowd to the doorway, then stood as people pushed slowly around him. His first impression of the platform was of uniform greyness, as if everything were covered with centuries-undisturbed dust; no peeling paint, no posters, no graffiti. He watched the passengers slowly turning the heavy horizontal bars of the exits. The metal did not creak here. The only sounds were scuffing footsteps and an occasional cough.

Then he noticed that this platform differed from any other he had ever seen in that it had no attendant's booth, no entrance of any kind. Exit only.

"This has to be some mistake," he said aloud.

"Yeah, mister. It sure is. You made it."

The girl dashed past him before he could grab her, sobbing as she went. He watched helplessly as she pushed her way through the exit and ran, impossibly *ran* up the steps on the other side, out of sight. The others paused until she was gone, then continued to pass through as slowly as ever.

Leaving.

He returned to his seat and sat there until the platform was empty. The train remained where it was, the motor humming, the doors open. Hours passed. He began to imagine that the train was alive, and it would never depart as long as it knew there was one passenger left undisgorged.

He considered going through the cars, looking for the crew. But he didn't go, half afraid of what he might find: demons and imps, the grim reaper, or, worse yet, nothing at all.

He lost all sense of time, and after a while fell asleep. In a dream he was looking down on his own body as it lay there on the seat, watching slowly as the face grew pale, then blotched and dark and bulging; then shrivelling again as rot set in, the lips drawing back from the teeth. Finally there were only bones, pure, clean bones, like a delicate alien sculpture wrapped in old rags. He felt a kind of release then, and he was drifting away, out the door, hovering over the platform. The train started up suddenly,

the doors still open, and the last thing he saw as it pulled away was the heap of bones spilling, almost pouring out of the remnants of his clothing and onto the floor.

When he awoke, he found himself on the seat, the car still motionless, the doors open. He'd gotten the message. He rose at once and walked out onto the platform, then through the exit. He was halfway up the stairs when he heard the train start up.

What now? he wondered. *What happens now?* For a moment he felt the worst fear he had known, the unreasoning certainty that nothing happened now, or ever again.

He wasn't in Hell. He hadn't really been expecting demons with pitchforks, but his idea of Hell was of an active place, damnation being, after all, an active thing, something you worked at. He joked to himself that, no, this wasn't Hell, but the next best thing, the South Bronx. The ruined buildings all around him gave that impression momentarily, but he realized, painfully, how ridiculous he was being.

He found himself in the middle of a deserted street, in the middle of a night truly darker than any he had ever known. He'd been caught outside during one of the great blackouts, but even then the stunned city had been alive with the flicker of distant car headlights and flashlights, candles in windows, and even cigarette lighters. This place was dead, utterly silent, the empty windows and open doors, the alleyways gaping like pits; the darkness closing in around him like a black pillow, suffocating the world.

He groped his way along past hulks of gutted, wheelless cars. Dust and newspapers stirred at his passage. He didn't have to wonder where everyone else from the train had gone. They had been swallowed, one by one, by this darkness and this dead city.

Desperate for light, he searched through his pockets and was relieved to find a book of matches. He lit one and his eyes were dazzled. He held the match out at arm's length until it burned near his fingers. Then he threw it away and lit another, and went on a ways until he found a litter basket dangling half-torn from a post. He dropped his second match and tore the basket loose, filled it with newspaper and scrapes of wood and assorted debris, then lit the mass on fire. The flames grew silently and huge

shadows billowed like black curtains among the empty buildings. He rummaged through the trunk of one of the ruined cars and found a tire iron. When the fire had burned down somewhat, he slid the iron through the basket and lifted it, thus creating a heavy, awkward sort of lantern.

It was as he started walking again that the light caught a human figure against a wall across the street. The man held his hands up to shield his face, startled like some deep-cavern creature that has never seen light.

"Hey! Come here!" His voice was like thunder. It echoed and re-echoed.

The other whimpered and edged away.

"I want to talk to you!" He ran toward the stranger, holding the basket before him by both ends of the tire iron. For an instant the man froze there, and he could make out a face, no details, just enough to give the impression that there was something terribly *wrong*, nothing like the horror beneath the Phantom of the Opera's mask, but merely an incomplete face, like a sand sculpture nearly erased by the wind.

The man bolted down an alley and was gone. He didn't give chase.

He sat down on the sidewalk, and after a while he slept again, and again he dreamed. This time he dreamt he was walking through the dark, empty city, until the buildings became no more than featureless slabs of stone and brick, and then there were no buildings at all and he stood in the middle of a flat, grey plain. He felt his body crumbling away then, his insides turning to cool, dry powder, seeping down through his legs and away. He felt his hollow skin filling with air, like a sail, and he stood, swaying dizzily. The sensation was pleasant. Then he was folding in on himself, the skin of his chest touching his back, and everything dropping as his legs folded up and he fell like a tent cut from its supports. This too was oddly pleasant, but at the very last instant he decided he didn't want to go through with it. He struggled to reverse the decay, to stand up again, but he couldn't even cry out.

When he awoke, he saw pale hands feeding the trash fire. Then he saw a slouching figure in a dark coat, and the incomplete face again, now, up close, more like a half-finished waxen mask, the eyes colorless, the nose a mere lump, no mouth

visible at all.

And behind this creature were a dozen more, standing in the darkness.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"Don't you know?" The voice was a faint monotone.

"No. I don't."

"We are like you. Everyone is of the same kind here."

As the others edged toward the fire, he saw that some of their faces were truly blank, mere ovals of flesh. Without realizing it until he was doing it, he felt his own face, to reassure himself that he still had a nose, eyebrows, a mouth.

"It is more correct to ask who we were, not who we are. We have all forgotten. It happens like that. You lose your past, your name, everything. Just forgotten. You'll forget too."

"No," he said. "I won't." He got to his feet, ready to run back to the subway and tear through the bars with his bare hands if he had to. Only he didn't know which way the entrance was from here.

"You can't leave," the stranger said. "There's nowhere to go."

"Really? What if I just keep walking?"

"Nowhere. You know that, if you are honest with yourself."

Then a new voice broke in.

"Please, mister, just shut up. Don't act so fucking better than—"

He knew that voice. It was the girl from the train. He pushed his way through the faceless things, shoving aside their almost weightless bodies, and he caught hold of a form he could barely see.

She went down beneath him, struggling. He pinned her to the pavement and ran his hand over her face, feeling the eyes, nose, cheekbones—

She bit him. Then she was sobbing softly, and it was he who was truly weeping.

"No, God damn it, no."

"Just let me . . . die, will you?"

"No," he said. "You're alive. You're going to stay that way. You're going to get out of here."

"What gives you the right?" she asked softly. "What gives you the fucking right?"

He got off her, but still held her firmly by the arm.

"Nobody gave me the right. I just took it. Get up."

She sat beside him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I don't have to tell you."

"No, I guess . . . you don't. But please, try to remember."

"Why do you care about me, mister?"

"I don't know. Let's just say I do."

Actually he did know. He didn't care *for her*. It merely mattered, for his own sake, that she recover and escape and negate the premise of this place. He was ashamed of being so selfish, but that was how he felt.

"My name is Marie," she said.

"Marie, my name is Kevin. Tell me about yourself, Marie. Anything you want to."

"Why?"

"Just because."

He felt something more now, the burning *wrongness* of her being there. *What's a nice girl like—?* It had to be a mistake.

Around them, the faceless people stood in a silent circle while the trash fire guttered out.

He listened to her. That was all he did, just listen. He prodded her a bit at first, but he must have said two words for every hundred of hers. When he knew that she was doing the right thing, he merely listened as she slowly reconstructed herself out of scraps of memories, incidents from childhood, favorite stories, jokes, movies she'd seen, anything that was part of the great clutter that had taken sixteen years to become Marie.

She didn't know why she was here. It had just happened, the letting go having come so easily. Her father she never saw. He probably did not know she was gone. Her stepmother, she was sure, would be glad of the fact. ("Would she really?" "She looks at me like I'm a fucking rag to wipe shit up with.") She had no close friends. All the girls in the private school she attended formed their cliques long before she'd transferred there in the tenth grade. But she liked to dance. She was very good at dancing. She was also very good with numbers, and could make computers do things. All these things were ingredients that made up Marie. They merely had to be spoken.

Hours passed. Still the faceless people stood, fascinated, as if trying to remember who they had been, once, before they had faded away. And in all those hours Kevin heard nothing very

unusual. There was no extraordinary terror Marie was escaping. She had merely given up, he thought, because it was easiest.

"I almost wish I were an axe-murderer or something," she said. "I feel like a fucking cliché."

He put his arm around her gently, and told her what he could remember of his own circumstances. Some of the details were gone, but with desperate care he recovered what he could.

"I'm a fucking cliché too," he said, "but there are lots of clichés out there who don't end up in places like this. Now whose fault is that?"

"So what makes you a fucking wise man?"

"Nothing, Marie. I may be a lot of things, but wise isn't one of them."

"Like I asked you before, why do you care about me?"

"I don't know," he said gently. "You know, I really don't. It just seems right. Can you take it at that, without any reason?"

She didn't say anything. He stood up. The faceless people drew back.

"Come on."

She joined him, and they walked for a while. No one followed. Their footsteps echoed in the dark distances.

Coming back.

Now it was his turn to talk. He tried to convince her, but was mostly trying to convince himself, that if you just went on living, the clutter of life would come together somehow.

"You know," he whispered conspiratorially, "some people make fucking art out of it."

Coming back.

They went for miles in the darkness. He had already come to understand that no direction meant anything here. Any direction would do.

Coming back.

He reached out and touched her face and she touched his. Then she paused, listening.

"Do you hear it?"

He listened. Nothing.

"It's loud, real loud!"

"What?"

"The subway! It's here!"

"Then go for it!"

She ran a short distance, then turned back to him, uncertain.

"Go!" he shouted.

"Thank you," she said, and then she ran. He watched her go, and it was only after she had vanished into the darkness that he thought to run after her. He ran with all his might until his heart felt like it was pounding in his throat and his lungs burned. He finally paused, gasping, and it was then that he heard the sound of the subway, faint and far away. In a moment it was gone.

Coming back.

But not this time. Not quite yet.

MAYALAND

by PAUL WITCOVER

Crumbling and empty, defaced by tourists, the temples still seethed with life, as though, Andrew thought, whatever built them might return at any moment. He couldn't have imagined how right he was.

The bar, called the Poco Loco, was dark and filled with tourists. It was the kind of bar where drifters washed up and stayed for months drinking and dancing in lazy eddies of movement and time. There was an incestuous feel to the place, a laconic desperation. A few hopeful glances swung toward Andrew as he entered, then seemed to lose interest. A mirror-ball revolved above the dance floor, where a drunken middle-aged Indian man in native dress was swaying alone to the New Wave beat. Andrew sat by himself in one corner, away from his countrymen and women.

The things that mattered to Andrew—the Indians and the land—seemed timeless, unalterable. There was a spirit investing every tree, lake, and volcano, a spirit, ancient but still green, that bided with the strength and patience of rock behind every Indian face just as the old temples persisted behind the mask of the jungle. Though crumbling and empty, defaced by tourists, the temples were still charged with life, as though they had been abandoned only yesterday by a people who had every intention of coming back. The Guatemalans called their country the land of eternal spring, but it seemed to Andrew that whatever was essential to this country and its people, whatever had raised the temples and named the gods, was hibernating now through a long, cold season, a winter of white men who would one day melt away.

After a beer, Andrew looked up to see the Indian weaving over to his table. He was tall for his people, but his dark, handsome

features were classically Mayan—thick lips, high cheekbones and forehead, and long, sloping nose. Andrew motioned for the man to sit down, glad to share his table with a local; he'd been dreading the intrusion of some sixties reject who would gripe about the country then try to sell him bad dope.

The Indian introduced himself as Victor. His Spanish was slurred, difficult to understand. He said something about the music.

"I saw you on the floor," Andrew said. "You dance well."

Victor nodded energetically. "I like that man; what is his name?"

Andrew thought back to what had been playing. "David Bowie?"

"David Bowie. Duran Duran also. You buy me a beer, okay?"

"Sure." He walked up to the bar and ordered two beers.

"Watch out for that guy," the bartender advised. "He's in here all the time hustling drinks."

"He doesn't have to hustle me," Andrew replied.

When he returned to the table, Victor took his beer and guzzled greedily. Then he gave Andrew a bleary smile. "You think I'm drunk, yes?" The smile vanished. "Okay, so look here, my friend." His brightly colored woolen shirt was belted below the waist, billowing out into a sort of pocket at the belly, like a kangaroo's pouch. From it Victor took a handful of stones which he spread out on the table in front of Andrew. "Go on, pick one up."

They were light . . . in fact, not stones at all, but large seeds of some sort, carved into faces.

"Avocado pits," said Victor with pride. "I carve them myself. So I drink too much beer, too much Quetzalteca; I am an artist!"

The detail of the work was breathtaking, seemingly beyond the power of Victor's shaky hands. Andrew was reminded of Mayan relics he had seen at Tikal and Bonampak. And, in fact, he recognized among the carvings the monstrous faces of Mayan deities: Chac, the rain god, with his great hooked nose like an elephant's trunk uplifted to spray water; the blank, saucer eyes and slack, buck-toothed mouth of the sun god, Kinich Ahau; and the skull-masked Ah Puch. There were also human faces, of both Indians and travelers like himself, yet even they seemed terrible, with expressions twisted to inhuman extremes of emotion as if they had absorbed the attributes of gods only to find their bodies too frail to long contain them.

"They're fantastic. Do you sell them?" Andrew asked.



Victor opened and shut his mouth, groping for words as though he had been insulted. He seemed both angry and hurt. "These are not for sale!" he said at last. "What do you take me for, one of those peasants who haunt the old places to sell their worthless imitation relics to stupid gringos as the real thing? Look in front of you. These are not lies, made to look old. I did not come up to you and say, 'See what I have plowed up in my corn-field!'" He made to sweep the pits back into his shirt, but in his fury missed and scattered them on the floor.

Andrew at once bent down with him to collect the carvings. When they had finished, Victor seemed calmer. He was a proud man, but then he had every right to be. Andrew had not meant to offend him. He apologized.

Victor smiled warmly. "I, too, am sorry. Again this night I have drunk too much. So for you, my friend, I will carve something special. Let us drink to friendship!"

Andrew bought two more beers.

"So why do you sit alone tonight?" Victor asked. "Where is your girlfriend?"

Andrew shrugged. "Too many tourists. If I'd wanted to see this kind of place, I would have gone to Ocean City, Maryland."

But Victor was interested in one thing only. "That is bad. Even I, who am married, have a girlfriend."

Andrew laughed.

"My wife is across the lake in San Lucas; my girlfriend lives in Sololá. Between the two of them I will soon be a dead man."

"What's it like in San Lucas?" Panajachel was proving too touristy for Andrew's tastes. In such places he always felt ashamed of his country and angry at himself.

"Ah! There it is beautiful and quiet, not like here. We fish and farm the land at the foot of the volcanoes just as we have always done. There I do my carving. The women are like flowers, and the children always singing. The soldiers have taken men from all the villages around here: San Pedro, San Pablo, San Jorge. But never from San Lucas. We are good workers."

"How is it possible to get there from here?"

Victor clapped him on the shoulder. "Tomorrow you will come with me, stay at my house."

Andrew didn't think he would ever grow used to the spontaneous generosity of the Indians; at least he hoped not. He accepted with pleasure.

"Where do you sleep tonight?" Victor asked.

Andrew said the name of his hotel.

"Tell them to wake you at sunrise. The first ferry to Santiago Atitlán leaves at six. We must be on it if we mean to catch the ferry from Santiago to San Lucas. There is but one each week; should we miss it we must walk sixteen kilometers."

"Where should I meet you?"

"The ferry leaves from the Hotel del Lago Azul. Walk down to the beach and turn left; you'll see the dock."

"I'll be there."

The next morning Andrew woke with a hangover and had to hurry to catch the ferry, arriving just as it was pulling out. Victor was suffering too; they greeted each other and sat side by side in silence as the noisy boat labored across the lake.

This was Andrew's first sight of Lake Atitlán. Soon he no longer noticed his hangover. The water was a deep, still blue over which the ferry passed as though gliding along glass. The air was clear and crisp. He could see across the lake, to where the thickly forested cones of three volcanoes humped one behind the other like vast green pyramids. Faint smears of smoke drifted from the sides and bits of orange sparked now and again; Victor explained that the farmers, who could not grow enough to support themselves on their own land, set these fires at night then took possession of the resulting fields. There they would grow food crops for a season or two before the landowners decided the patch could more profitably support coffee and either hired or simply evicted them. The results of this process could be seen to the right, where a fourth, smaller volcano stood, its sides an orderly patchwork of plowed fields.

As they drew closer to the opposite shore, Andrew could make out splendid homes tucked like castles amid unspoiled tracts of pine: the estates of the landowners and vacation homes of top army officers, according to Victor. Then the ferry rounded a bend and Andrew saw the village of Santiago Atitlán.

Dugouts from the village dotted the water to either side of them; the fishermen paused in the lowering of their nets and waved to the passing ferry. Andrew waved back. Up ahead, two rickety docks splintered out over the lake. A crowd of Indians in their bright costumes stood on one, waiting to load up for the trip back to Panajachel; it seemed as though the dock must collapse beneath their weight. More dugouts were drawn up to the

shore around the docks, interspersed with heaps of seaweed left to steam in the sun. Behind the docks the grass grew thick as the ground sloped sharply up to a narrow cobblestone street lined with modest shops, restaurants, and houses. Farther up rose the blue and green dome of the church, topped with a red cross.

No sooner had he stepped from the boat than Andrew was surrounded by a flock of small girls who thrust bouquets of woven bracelets up into his face, chirping for him to buy. Victor waved them away. They dropped back, following at a discreet distance as Victor lead Andrew to the San Lucas ferry. It turned out they had fifteen minutes to wait. Victor stretched out on the grass to nap, but Andrew felt like exploring the town.

Away from Victor, the girls beset him again. He tried to be firm, but in the end their dirty faces, full of the intense youth and beauty that passed over Indian girls like a shadow whose substance they would never know, persuaded him to buy a bracelet from each. Anyway, they made good gifts; generally, he bought them from one group of girls only to give them away to another.

As he walked up toward the market, Andrew saw that the influx of tourists that had overrun Panajachel was spilling over into Santiago. This was perhaps inevitable, but still it saddened him to see how many stalls hung with goods no Indian would buy.

The market itself preserved much of its traditional flavor, however here Indians still traded with Indians. The atmosphere was boisterous, but jolly, like a festival. The stalls burgeoned with plantains and vegetables, clay pots and clothes of synthetic fibers. The crowd was in constant motion; it was impossible to stand still without receiving a poke in the back. Nonetheless, groups of women held their own around certain stalls, gossiping as their dirty, barefoot children chased each other and tussled underfoot. Now and again a vain rooster loudly asserted its importance. Andrew bought some bananas for breakfast.

On the way back to the ferry, he heard a sudden roaring on the road behind him and leaped aside. A truck sped by, filled with soldiers who stood uncomfortably squeezed together, rifles poking skyward. The oldest among them looked younger than Andrew. To a man, their faces were blank, without individuality or intelligence. The Indians quieted and kept their eyes to the ground until the truck had passed.

Back on the ferry, he and Victor were the only passengers. As they ate the bananas, Andrew asked about what he had seen. Victor pointed toward the land they were passing, the same thickly forested slopes Andrew had noticed earlier.

"The army says there is danger through here from guerrillas."

"But isn't that the way to San Lucas?"

Victor nodded. "Don't worry. There are no guerrillas."

"How do you know?"

"Villagers die there. Some gringos too a while back." He fixed Andrew with his gaze. "But never has a soldier died there."

Andrew shook his head. "I don't understand what's happening here. The guerrillas. The soldiers. You people in the middle. So much death wherever I go in this beautiful country."

"We do not speak of these things," Victor said.

"It is a stain on the memory of the Maya," Andrew said with feeling. "I wish there was something I could do."

Victor did not reply. He was carving an avocado pit.

Half an hour later, the ferry docked at San Lucas. The contrast with Santiago Atitlán was considerable. Here the docks were empty, the streets deserted save for strutting chickens and wasted, scavenging dogs. There was no one to cry for Andrew to buy their wares. The houses were smaller and in poor repair. But Victor was all smiles as he hopped down from the boat.

"What did I tell you, my friend? Here the air is clear!"

To Andrew it smelled of cows and pigs.

Now a few people were making their way down to the dock; the weekly ferry brought mail, as well as hard-to-find goods ordered from Panajachel. Victor knew them all; he sang out his greetings, and they answered in kind. Like Victor, they had pronounced Mayan features, more so than the Indians Andrew had seen in Santiago. Victor introduced him around, then they set off for his home.

It was a good walk, somewhat outside of the village proper. All the way Victor was talking, telling him who lived where, pointing out his favorite bar, the local school, the place where, fifteen years ago, he had fought and killed his chief rival for the hand of the woman who became his wife. They passed fields where women and children bent beneath the hot sun over dusty furrows, porches where men relaxed in the shade sipping Quetzalteca and spitting into the street. Victor called out to them all with pleasure; whatever they thought of him in Panajachel, Victor was

obviously highly respected in his own village.

They stopped at a rickety wooden fence. Behind the gate the ground was torn and muddy; a line of thin planks led up to the house, a dubious-looking amalgamation of dried clay bricks, tree limbs, and rusty sheet metal topped with thatch. Behind the house, Andrew could make out a leaning shack of rotten boards: the outhouse. And behind that, a chicken coop set round with wire that seemed in better condition than the house. Victor opened the gate and ushered Andrew through, kicking meanwhile at a weasely piglet that had insinuated itself between his feet. It scampered off, squealing mournfully.

The door to the house was wide open, as a consequence of which several hens were bobbing peremptorily toward Andrew as he entered. Startled, they careened out two windows like cackling buzzsaws, causing him to step back into Victor.

"They scare you, eh?" laughed Victor, pushing past him into the room. "Sit down, my friend." He kicked a small stool to Andrew, who perched atop it, his knees pressing his chin.

Andrew was relieved to see that the inside of the house did not mirror the outside. Here the dirt floor was packed tight and neatly swept. In the center of the room sat a fat cookstove with a blackened pot on top. A hammock was slung in one corner; a washbasin and cooking implements hung from nails along the walls. There was a long table upon which rested an oil lamp and a small transistor radio with its innards spilling out. A sheathed machete leaned against the door. In another corner nestled a shrine to the Virgin Mary, draped with crepe paper and fronted by rows of festively colored candles burning down to puddles of wax. The space behind Victor was cut off by a curtain. Excusing himself, he ducked behind it only to reappear seconds later with his arms about the waist of a shrunken, smiling woman and two sleepy-eyed children, a boy and a girl. "My wife and my youngest, Juan and Concepción," he introduced, laughing as the two children, each of whom could not have been older than ten, pressed back into their mother's skirts, eyeing Andrew with something like awe.

Andrew smiled and winked at them, provoking squeals of delight. Remembering the bracelets he had bought that morning, he reached into his pockets and held out two closed fists. "Go ahead, pick one," he said.

Timidly, Concepción inclined her head toward his left hand. When he opened it, she beamed with pleasure and took the brace-

let. Emboldened by her example, Juan pried open the other fist and snatched his bracelet.

"Thank our guest," Victor directed.

His son and daughter looked at each other then ran out without a word.

"Thank you," said Victor's wife, smiling and nodding.

Andrew waited for her to be introduced, but Victor merely guided her back behind the curtain. Then he took Andrew by the arm. "Come. There is a place I will show you."

Andrew was tired, but he did not feel he could refuse. "Where are we going?"

"To an old place up in the mountains. Don't worry, it will be safe; no one knows of it but me. I show it to you because I think you will understand."

Victor filled two jugs with water. He gave Andrew a candle and kept one for himself. Then they set out.

They climbed for hours up the side of a volcano that Victor called Atitlán; he did not know whether the lake had been named for the volcano or the other way around. It was hard going, their only companions the birds and lizards that fled before them into the thick forest. Victor lead him down into a ravine cut by a waterfall. Obscured by dense foliage there, an opening winked large enough for a man to crawl through. Victor lit his candle and entered on his hands and knees. Andrew followed. "We must be noisy to frighten off the snakes," Victor said. Andrew had to force himself to continue. The air grew cooler and drier the deeper they went. After a time—he could not have said how long—the passage widened. Soon they could stand.

Andrew gasped. Around and above him, illumined by candle light, the cavern vaulted out of rock and shadowy echoes of rock. Somewhere far away, water dripped.

It was a Mayan site. Untouched by time or archeologists. The walls were covered with painted glyphs and figures. Andrew brought his candle close. A red figure in a snake headdress held a man's head in one outstretched hand; before him knelt his victim, chalky blue, blood spouting from the neck to form a lush green cornstalk. Close by, a woman passed a thick, thorny rope through her tongue, catching the blood in a bowl at her feet. In the center of the cavern was an altar, a round, green stone ringed by carved skulls and inlaid with turquoise and shell. Behind it was a throne in the shape of a jaguar devouring a human heart. Stellae

stood around the altar, some marked with dates in the Mayan bar-and-dot system that Andrew could recognize but not read, others blank-faced. The terrible faces of gods and goddesses leaned out from the walls as though the rest of their bodies would soon follow. There were four of the rain god, Chac, each facing a different direction and colored white, black, yellow, and red.

Andrew turned to Victor, who was silently watching him. "What is . . . was . . . this place?"

"This is where I come to carve," he said. He placed his candle on the altar. Andrew did likewise. They sat facing each other. Andrew reached for the water, but Victor stopped him. He gave him the second jug, which Andrew had thought contained water. "This is *balche*. It is an old drink made from honey. Here we should drink what they drank." Andrew nodded. The *balche* was thick and heady. He felt as though he was taking part in some ancient ceremony.

"I found this place as a child," Victor said. "At first it frightened me, but I could not keep away. I heard the builders of this place call out. Though my mind understood nothing, my bones shook with the old language. I listened and I learned much. I came here and carved, thinking about what I had learned, and more became clear to me."

"What is this place?" Andrew repeated.

"Listen." Victor had taken out his knife, was carving an avocado pit.

There was only the distant drip, drip of water.

Andrew sipped the *balche*. His head was spinning. The candle light flickered over the walls, making the scenes painted there come alive. It was not water dripping, but blood. In red streams it poured down the walls. Andrew screwed his eyes shut, but the vision persisted. And then he heard Victor's voice echo through the cavern of his skull.

"You cannot escape the blood, my friend. That is why I brought you here. To understand from these things that what happens in my country today is not a stain on the memory of the Maya, as you put it, but that same memory, a living force still for all it may be forgotten by some. This place, this country, this people—everything is soaked in blood, as much today as centuries ago."

Andrew found that he had lost all feeling in his body. He felt as though he were floating in darkness, borne up by the steady

voice. He could not speak.

"We are the true guerrillas. The others merely do our work. Army or rebels, the gods are served."

Andrew opened his eyes as though waking from a deep sleep. They were no longer alone in the cavern. All the Indians from San Lucas stood around. Some held torches, others swung censers from which an acrid, sooty smoke leaked and stung his eyes, made them water. The smell of *balche* was in the air. He looked down at his body: he had been stripped naked and painted a chalky blue. He still could not feel his limbs; he was being supported by two old men who wore masks of Chac. One of the men was painted yellow, the other red. Two more Chacs stood before him, black and white.

Then he saw Victor. He was dressed like one of the figures on the wall. He took something from his belt and held it up for Andrew to see. It was an avocado pit carved with his likeness, only twisted by pain. "This is your god face," he said. "In this way you will be honored among us, my friend." He paused, then added, "You asked what you could do."

Then the four Chacs grabbed hold of him by his arms and legs and bent him back over the green altar. He could not move, or scream, or feel; out of the corner of one eye he saw the thin, braceleted wrists of Juan and Concepción. He heard Victor speak in a language he could not understand. His heart was leaping against his chest like a wild thing that had caught the scent of freedom.

The Holiday House

by A. R. MORLAN

Geoff wasn't chicken. No sir.
But all the same, you wouldn't catch him *dead*
going into a haunted house.

"Am not." Geoff tried to put some distance between himself and his pals, but his Air Jordans weren't much help this afternoon, no matter what the ads on the tv promised.

"Am tooooh," Tony sing-songed right behind him, with Adam bringing up the rear. The pair stopped abruptly when Geoff wheeled around in mid-stride, arms crossed, a wild squint in his eyes which didn't come from the glare of the descending sun behind them.

"I. Am. Not. Chicken." he spat out in a flat, even voice which sounded uncomfortably like Police Chief Stanley's did the time he warned them all about riding their bikes on the sidewalks, *again*.

Not willing to be beaten that easily, especially with his tag-along fourth-grader cousin in tow, Tony stuck balled fists under his armpits, flapping his elbows up and down.

"Paw-wuk-wuk-wuk," he cackled, scratching at the cracked pavement with a duct-tape mended sneakered foot. Adam hung back, giggling. Jeezus, Tony wondered, *did I sound that dumb when I was his age?*

Refusing to give in, Geoff simply stood there, moving only when a Wisconsin state bird (AKA the mosquito) landed on a tanned forearm. His slap rang out with dry clarity in the nearly deserted old residential section of Ewerton where the boys had been wandering around for the past hour or so, just hanging out. Most everyone who belonged on Roberts Street was inside watching television, or fixing dinner, or at work; visible were an elderly couple sitting on the

screened-in porch of their yellow Victorian, and the Happy Wanderer, slowly shambling off to the half-way house on Crescent Street where he lived with the rest of Ewerton's semi-trainable mentally disabled, or coo-coo-boos to Geoff and Tony's crowd at school. Mentally disabled or coo-coo-boo, the Wanderer ignored Tony.

"Maybe he's a ding-a-ling like the Happy Wanderer," Adam chipped in during a lull in the clucking. That worked.

"I ain't no coo-coo-boo!" Geoff shot back before he could help it; instantly he wished he had a lip zipper, or at least a Velcro yap-flap.

Tony let his arms drop. Pulling loose threads off of the bottom of his faded cut-offs, and hating Adam for beating him to the punch like that (*wait till I get that snot-brain home*), Tony casually wheedled, "At least the Happy Wanderer ain't scared to go up to the Holiday House. 'Course if *you* are, *we* understand, don't we, cuz?" The younger boy started to shake his head *no* but Tony overrode his mom's sister's dumbbunny kid's lack of comprehension with the capper, "Least the Wanderer don't say he's not a chicken and then turn around and act like one."

"The Happy Wanderer don't even *talk*," Geoff retorted, "he's so dopey all he can do is shuffle-butt around and walk up to people's kitchen windows to smell what's cookin'. He eats with his fingers, fer cryin' out loud. All that moron knows 'bout chicken is eating it."

"And even *he* ain't been by the Holiday House since—"

"Shutcha *trap* already," Tony yelled at his cousin. Placing his hands on his hips, Tony spread his bare legs until he looked like a four-foot-seven copy of the Colossus of Rhodes transplanted to the river of asphalt between the sleepy rows of towering, slightly decayed Victorians, ancient swaying elms, and rusted-out late-model cars. Glancing behind him up the street, toward the Holiday House in all its sage-green and warped-siding splendor, Tony asked, "Are you more of a *man* than the Wanderer?"

A pause, then, "Well, *sure*." (The Happy Wanderer started roaming the streets of Ewerton back in 1967, fresh from fifteen years in Special Ed classes.)

"You got more guts than the Wanderer?"

"Yeah!"

"You gonna go up to the Holiday House?"

"Shit *no*." With that, Geoff spun around and headed for home, toward the part of town where the sprawling split-level

ranch homes were surrounded by manicured turf, all the trees were uniformly under seven feet tall, and the polished cars still had that showroom smell inside.

"Paw-wuk-wuk-wuk-paw-wukwukwuk—" Now the old couple in the butter-colored-gingerbread-and-stained-glass confection craned their Q-Tip fluffy heads in Geoff's direction. The Happy Wanderer was long gone.

His pace slowing, Geoff thought, *Aw, what the H, it's just a frigging house—*

Black and red Air Jordans beat a light tattoo on the uneven street below. Stopping just a step short of Tony's face, Geoff warned in a Bubble-Yum scented whisper, "Don'chew say *nuthin'* 'bout this to my folks, you hear? You know how they feel 'bout B and E, even if the house is empty."

"'Cept for the ghost," Adam piped up, but Tony cuffed his shaggy head.

The three boys ran up to the overgrown lawn of the Holiday House—when the grass got to be *too* long, the city sent over some men from the City Crew to mow it down to a militaristic stubble—stopping short of the curb.

There was no sidewalk in front of the house, unlike its neighbors. Old Man Holiday's wife had been a Crescent (as in Crescent Street and generations of Crescents in Ewerton since the glaciers), so when the Sidewalk Ordinance went into effect back in 1949, the city fathers kindly turned their heads and looked over their collective shoulders while everyone else's lawn got dug up. Hence the Holidays, Wilbur and Hortense, didn't have to shell out the hundred and fifty dollars that it cost to have a sidewalk put in if a homeowner didn't have one in front of his house already. Nobody was supposed to notice the gap in the ribbon of concrete that ran past the rest of the homes on Roberts Street, and if anyone sent a letter of complaint to the city council or the Ewerton *Herald*, it would conveniently get lost in the mail. A lot of letters vanished that way in early 1950.

So there the trio stood, sneakered toes touching the sprouting cracks in the curb before them, holding grimy hands over their eyes against the glare of the sunlight behind the crumbling chimney which topped the gingerbread, spindles, and column-covered stale cake of a house like a melted candle. Without the traditional decorations in the windows and on the porch, the house hardly looked the way it used to when the old coot Holiday

was alive.

True to his name, Old Man Holiday (Geoff and Tony and Adam's grandparents used to call Wilbur H. "Old Man Holiday" when they were not much older than the children of their future offspring) always made a big to-do about decorating his house—paid for with Crescent money—for each and every holiday, be it Flag Day, Easter, Halloween, or National Secretaries' Week. From the time anyone could remember, decades before the Great Sidewalk Hoo-Ha, Old Man Holiday could be seen festooning his wrap-around porch with appropriate colors of cloth (later crepe paper) bunting, hanging seasonal doo-dads and cut-outs behind the window shades, putting things like painted wooden Easter eggs or tiny flags on the shrubs in front of the birdbath, and just driving poor Hortense absolutely bananas with his obsessive zeal. Unfortunately for her, she happened to die around Halloween in 1972, so she didn't even rate new decorations for the occasion of her demise. He just left on the black bunting (and whatever orange he couldn't reach after the snowfall made the ladder impractical) until New Year's.

After his wife died (croaked, to the boys' crowd) Old Man Holiday really went slap-holiday-happy; like the time he covered the whole lawn, front and back, with cones of corn stalks for Thanksgiving, or the time in '76 when he paid Tony's dad three hundred dollars to paint his chimney red, white, and blue for the Bicentennial. Later Tony's father said that the old codger wanted to paint the entire house red, white, and blue, a different band of color for each storey, but Mr. Wilkes convinced Mr. Holiday that it would take at least three coats of the white and two each for the red and blue to properly cover the sage-green of the house, and Holiday was reluctant to cough up *that* much baloney, so he settled for his usual tri-color bunting and two dozen slightly yellowed wedding bells bought for half price at Clausen's Hallmark and Gift Shoppe.

By the time Labor Day rolled around, Tony's dad had had to climb back up on the roof to restore the chimney's original brick red color, after which he refused to paint it again, so 1976 marked the first and final appearance of the Flag Chimney.

All the paint—both tri-color and brick red—was peeled off of the chimney now. Not that Geoff and Tony were old enough to remember how it had looked during that long-ago summer, but that Bicentennial chimney had passed into the popular history of

Ewerton, just like the that time the county ambulance had had to come out to the shitty section of town, past Crescent Street, to Larry Kominski's apartment to cart off his wife who went snow-nutty two Januaries ago. It was destined to be talked about and mulled over at church pot-luck dinners and graduation day picnics for years to come. (Adam's dad's brother, Steve, worked at the paper mill with Larry, and Steve said Maureen sort of reverted back to her infancy, and spent her days at the nursing home sucking on the corner of her bedpillow like it was a big teat. Adam and Tony's families agreed that cabin fever can get to a body that way.)

Anyhow, it was a shame that the chimney paint was gone, and that there were no faded Fourth of July decorations covering the house, because the dwelling seemed so . . . defenseless without them. Red, white, and blue paper buntings would have been so appropriate right now, even though the Fourth was nearly a month gone. There being no holidays in August, Old Man H. always left the July things up until the summer thunderstorms did the removal job for him. (Like the letters of complaint regarding the Missing Sidewalk Link, those protests over the piled up bunting and soggy honeycomb bells stuffing the rain gutters managed to get nicely lost in the mail.)

Without its gaudy seasonal clothing, the Holiday House was a naked old man, its pitiful bumps, popped veins, and sparse tufts of hair showing obscenely in the harsh light of the sun. Not that the house had ever been handsome; it was a bit too fussy around the eaves, and too massive around the bottom columns for that, but at least the decorations gave it a false life, not unlike the clownish make-up the stiff-picklers smeared on their clients' unprotesting faces. Unadorned as it was now, as it had been for the last two years—ever since Tony and Geoff were pulling their sleds past the House on their way home from the hill by the drive-in, and they saw the Reish-Byrne Funeral Home's head people-pickler (Mr. Reish to their parents) and Police Chief Sawyer coming out of the Holiday House bearing a white-wrapped figure on the stretcher they carried between them, and the two men refused to acknowledge Tony's query of "He dead?"—there was something else about the house that the boys hesitated to put into thoughts, let alone words, something that formed the faintest image, the softest murmur of . . . *wanting*. . . . As in, "Please fill me, dress me. Lonely. Naked. Empty."

Silly notions, of course. All unoccupied houses looked that way. In Tony and Adam's part of town, the freshly slapped-together two-piece homes which found their way to Ewerton on the backs of trucks had that lonesome look, until there was a station wagon parked in the garage, some My Pretty Pony curtains in the back bedroom windows, a turtle-shaped plastic wading pool on the lawn and a lone size-one thong lying next to the garbage cans. The only difference with the Holiday House was that it could never hope for the station wagon, My Pretty Pony curtains, turtle wading pool, or even a battered old thong to keep it company. Roberts Street was strictly senior citizens and students' apartments territory.

"—and who cares if a lot of pets are reported missing in this part of town, that don't mean that this place is haunted," Geoff explained, ignoring the fact that he hadn't seen a squirrel or a bird or even a stray cat roaming around since two blocks ago.

Tony shook his head. "My dad says that he found a mess of dead birds clogging up the top of the chimney when he painted it, and he should know—"

"That was ten years ago. 'Sides, a cat probably hid 'em there."

"Crows and raccoons hide stuff. Cats eat what they catch."

"Don't mean nothing. Don't mean that the place is spooked."

Geoff could hear the wind beat the unlatched screen door against the front wall of the house. He knew without touching it that the front door would open at the slightest turn of that huge domed knob....

"—about that Andersen guy who blew town on his lunch hour last June, left his car and keys right in front of the tracks up by the—"

Tony could be a real A-hole sometimes. "What *about* him? He was two miles away from here. Old Man Holiday's place couldn't have gobbled him up. *Jeeze.*"

"But his wife was a Holiday, few times removed—"

"So *what?*"

"That means the place can get you wherever you are—"

"Bull-sheet." Geoff stepped onto the unkempt lawn, near the huge elm with the Hudson Realty FOR SALE sign and the tattered remains of a yellow cloth ribbon clinging to the bark. Even the hostage crisis rated a decoration in Holiday's eyes.

Really, that Tony could be such a woman when it came to the wild stories, and when he was dragging along his cousin,

AKA babysitting, Tony would just shovel it on higher and deeper for the kid's benefit. Not that it hadn't been creepy, though, hearing about that empty Subaru just sitting there by the tracks, key in the ignition, doors unlocked, just waiting for someone to start it up, waiting for somebody like Holiday's great-great grandnephew by marriage (as in shotgun) to drive that car back to the sash-and-door factory, then back home to Andersen's house out past Crescent Street, in the shit-ball side of town. Over where Maureen Kominski went nutso one snowy January day—that it had been snowing was also duly noted in town lore. Just as the official word of mouth would state forevermore that it was a warm June day when Sam Andersen—Paul to some folks—skipped town without benefit of car, spare change, or so much as a pair of spare undershorts, leaving a wife and bunch of toddlers in a lurch.

And according to the word of Ewerton, the kind of word spoken only over late-night cups of coffee long after the kids are asleep, or over the *slug-slug* of the washers at the Super-Suds Launderette on Sixth Avenue, the consensus was that not having a sidewalk wasn't the only ... *different* thing about the Holiday House. But the adults, having shed their imaginations, were content—or simply opted to settle—for that fact. Their kids took it one, or maybe two or three better.

Standing now on the porch of the house—warped boards above and below him, thick spin of cobweb covering the yellow bulb next to the front door, and piles of molded leaves huddled in the far corners of the porch—Geoff tried to look through one of the misty windows. The bottom of a scalloped, fringed, and water-stained shade, pull-ringed string hanging straight down, was even with his eye level; beyond that he could make out only thick, overfed dust kitties curled up in the faint light which slanted from another window across the wooden floor. No ghosts—not that anyone had ever actually reported seeing one here anyhow—but, more importantly, no missing pets or great-great grandnephews. Some lines through the dust that may have been animal tracks, though. No biggie.

"Still chicken, big man?" Tony yelled from next to the elm tree. Adam was pushing an empty Skor wrapper around the pavement with his foot.

The lingering heat made fine trickles of moisture run down Geoff's armpits under his Nike sleeveless t-shirt. Even the fact that the sun was dropping fast didn't make a difference. Geoff wished

that he had a Pudding Pop, a Kool-Aid Ice Tup from the fridge at home, even a lousy old piece of ice. Didn't those guys realize that it was going to be like a frigging oven in there? Holiday's relatives left up most of the shades after they took out the furniture, and the sun had been beating in there all day long.

Well, he'd show those dipdongs. When Geoff came out of there, all sweating and parched, he'd beat a box of Jello Pops out of that Tony. Geoff knew which pocket old Tony-Baloney Wilkes kept his spare change in.

Without a word, he went up to the door, turned the hot knob, and went in, making sure that he slammed the door behind him *hard*. Geoff thought that he heard Tony say something, but the dumbing silence of the house rang in his ears, drowning out much of Tony's voice.

The place was humongous. Inside it seemed even bigger than it looked on the outside, but Tony's dad said that dark paint does that to a house. The dust kitties clung to his red and black shoes with invisible claws, refusing to be shaken off. Geoff balked at reaching down and pulling them off with his fingers. At least they'd prove that he had gone in, looked around.

Dark wood doors, over eight feet high. Door frames six inches thick all around each door, and deeply carved. Massive cabbage roses on the walls, water-stained dark brown along the outside walls. Pale memories of the oval and square pictures which once hung on the walls. A curved staircase in the hallway, faded flowers underfoot. His scalp itched from the excess wetness under his hair.

Pantry so empty it swallowed all sounds of footfalls. Rusted hulk of a woodstove in the kitchen, greyish powdery logs scattered about the dusty floor. Brown fluttery rings of rust stain under the pump in the sink. And *hot*, like the room was in the oven and not the other way around. A forgotten shriveled sprig of mistletoe hung above the door to the cellar.

Up the stairs. Happily no squeaks or groans from under his feet. Sweat ran down from the back of his neck, paused at the elasticized waist of his shorts, then continued down to the split between his cheeks. Like walking into the bathroom after his sister Julie had taken a shower and forgot to open up the window afterward . . . Only *dry*. Same amount of heat, though.

Bedroom, bedroom, bedroom. Not that the beds were there anymore, but the outlines of the headboards were there, like when

Geoff stared at something brightly lit then closed his eyes to see the image burned on the underside of his lids. Geoff's toes felt sticky under his socks, and the backs of his calves were damp. He was within mounting distance of the next flight of stairs when he saw the door. Unlike the others, it was shut. Tucked partway under the curve of the staircase, it almost blended in with the deep brown wallpaper covering the hallway.

Under the bottom of the door the floor looked slightly whitish. Probably mold. Geoff remembered the time when his mom left a loaf of Ewerton Bakery bread, the kind with no BHT in it, in the kitchen cupboard for a week last July. Mold just loved days, places, like this.

But he was pleasantly surprised when he touched the knob. It was cool, almost cold. If he had been younger, he would have been tempted to try that dumb tongue-on-the-pumphandle trick that Granpa always teased Geoff and his sister about during Christmasses at the farm. He and Julie never took Gramps up on his dollar wager to do it, though. But this, this unexpected pocket of relief, of *cool*, was better than a won dollar bet; it was like wishing on the birthday cake candles before blowing, then managing to snuff all of them out in one breath, and forget about the cheater puffs. Even the wood felt chill, almost moist. Resting his sweaty cheek against the door, Geoff turned that wonderful knob and entered the cool.

The *room* was the cool. Shimmering ribbons of rippled ice—sweetly slick like the sticky hunks of ribbon candy Granpa would pass around at family gatherings—adhered to the faded trellis wallpaper all around him. Beneath his Air Jordans the wood floor was crunchy with frost, a November morning lawn stretching out in untrod purity for yards before him. His soft soles made eager smacking noises with each step.

Dim sunlight filtered in through the north window, the only window in the room. A tacky melted-bead plastic Santa, the kind that folks in Tony and Adam's part of town put on their garage doors come Christmas time, obscured the lower half of the window. Flanking the decoration, the flimsy lace curtains were frozen to the window frame. Geoff tried to move one; the brittle fabric broke under the tips of his now-cool fingers. Likewise, the glass itself was frozen, swirled, really, with dainty curliques of ridged frost. Geoff in his wonder did not notice the fine threads of sweat that covered his body solidifying into similar delicate raised pat-

terns of ice.

Old Man Holiday had hung his plastic Santa in between the storm and inner windows. His mom did the same thing with her suncatchers so the cat couldn't swat them off the window and onto the kitchen floor. The overlay of frost dimmed the bright colors of the waving Santa. Geoff remembered Granpa's bet about sticking his tongue on the pumphandle; Granpa would tease them and tell Geoff and Julie, "Betcha couldn't do it and not get stuck there ... if you kids get stuck, you can't holler for help without a tongue." About then Mom or Dad would tell him to quit saying stuff like that, scaring the kids, blah, blah, blah ... what the heck, Geoff thought, an old window can't be like a pump handle. Granpa wouldn't pay him for taking up the bet here, with no one watching, but either way, he had always wondered how it felt ... it couldn't hurt as much as Granpa claimed it did. So intent on sticking his tongue as long and as flat as he could that he didn't notice how white *everything* looked through the window, Geoff knelt down and let his head incline toward the window, tongue out and ready.

"Tony, our moms are gonna wonder where we are," Adam whined, hugging his scabby knees with brown arms. Getting up from where he had been sitting for the past three hours under the elm tree, Tony felt the sting of hot pins and needles in his calves and feet. Sitting down next to the Royal Pain in the Ass, he assured the smaller boy, "Our moms will think we're at Geoff's."

"But they'll call and we won't be there, or his mom will call our moms and either way we'll get our butts kicked."

"They'll think we're on the way home." Tony looked up at the house, hoping for a moved shade, a flicker from Geoff's Bic—Tony knew that his friend sneaked his dad's cigarettes—*something* that proved that Geoff was still in there.

"But then our *dads* will drive around looking for us, and when they find us *they'll* kick our—"

"Cram it." Tony got up and began to circle the house, not right next to it, but along the edges of the grassy lawn. Afraid to stay by the curb alone, Adam tagged along at a distance behind Tony. Both looked, saw nothing. Adam's snuffly breathing sounded disproportionately loud and wet in Tony's ears. He was tempted to give Adam a smack upside the head; sure as shit that would be

when Dad or Uncle Jim would be making a pass of the neighborhood, car lights on high beam, and he'd be in for an ass chewing, while the runt got off scot free.

Itching the mosquito bites on his arm, Tony craned his neck up, up, to try and look into the second and third floor windows. On the north side, near a corner of the second storey, was a single window which looked like it did back on that sub-zero day when Old Man Holiday kicked the bucket. One of those cheap plastic bead Santas waved down at Tony, through a string of Christmas lights tacked around the inner outline of the window. The edges of the shade looked different, too. They were white, not the yellow-tan of the others. *The old fart probably sprayed on that white crap that's supposed to look like frost*, Tony told himself. Not that many people in Ewerton, or much of northern Wisconsin, had a dire need for that stuff. Mother Nature would do the job for free when the temperature dipped below zero.

The street lamps sizzled on, cold greenish-tinged white. The sprayed-on frost glittered delicately in the light, which was kind of weird, since the stuff the merchants sprayed on the store windows always looked flat and dull....

Tony broke into a run, slapping Adam on the arm as he passed him by. "C'mon," he shouted, "Beat'cha home."

"But what about Geoff?" came the wailed question, followed by the pound of feet on pavement.

"Probably snuck out back and went home," Tony puffed. "Probably eatin' ice cream at home and laughin' at us," Tony shot back before he pulled ahead.

Tony didn't want Adam to see that he was chicken.

Three Poems: The Shaman

by RONALD TERRY

A portrait
of the headless god.

Birth of the Shaman

Birth without conception,
find the child
huddled in water,
floating in faint memories of music,
dreaming your discovery
of his eternal form
in a picture of ruins—
the headless god,
his mother long gone
into the flames of thunder.

Marriage of the Shaman

From the palm of her hand
I pick the seed of fire.

The sundial casts its shadow
across the earth,
her body losing color

as it dances until all is wind
sleeping in the arms of darkness.

From behind the window
her lover's shadow speaks.
I listen without tongue,
without grace of no desire,
for I have swallowed the seed—
my veins give birth to flame.

Light cannot run from its own illumination,
the night unending and bright.
Her face is a silver mask,
her labia lined with chrome—
mirrors of the moon.
I cannot find her smile or my own.

In the drone of bright light
we sleep and dream
and awaken without memory.

The Shaman's Meal

What food attracts the dead?
Does wine intoxicate them?
Or do they demand blood
to sharpen their forms?
I wait to offer.
I am hungry.
I wait to seat them at my table
and swallow the morning.
To eat with the dead,
to sing the songs of two worlds—
I could dance and dream,
spin in the womb of the rising star,
and no one would see
except the sleeping gods.

Still-Life

by JULIE YOBST

She noticed his hands the instant that they met; they spoke to her, rippled blond hairs at her seductively. They *knew* her. As only lovers could.

Early that evening she gathered her flowing brown hair into a tightly wound bun at the nape of her neck. Although she reached around to catch each strand to bind it, a few rebellious wisps tickled her skin as she mounted the stairs to his apartment. The door was open, so she knocked on the wall in the hallway.

"I've been waiting for you . . . wondering if you'd come," he said from inside the room. Though his voice was not raised, she could hear him clearly. "Aren't you going to come up?"

He sat hunched over a small paintbox, squinting closely at an empty canvas. She couldn't see his hands.

She had seen them though, when they had first met in the office where he sketched graphic designs and she had a summer job cleaning. Those tough, hardened tools at the ends of his arms had spoken to her. Their bones stretched his tanned skin taut over their backs. They had rippled blond hairs at her temptingly. They knew her.

"What's your name, anyway?" He stared at his brushes.

"Lenore," she lied. "Call me Nora."

She took a step closer to his back, eager to peek at the two artists she remembered. She could almost see their short white nails glisten. The man could have been thirty, blond shaggy hair and beard masquing his features, but his hands were ageless.

"What type of brush would you prefer to paint you, Nora?"

Sable?" Now they appeared at his shoulder. They fingered a long-handled paintbrush, holding it high. Light streamed in from a wall full of windows, opaquing the surface skin of their digits. They glowed. Their slender fingers ran along the white handle of the brush. Their nails glinted.

"Yes, sable," she whispered. And came closer to where he sat. At his shoulder she halted. She could smell him as she gazed past his neck, at his wrists. She held her stare from the hands, afraid of what they would say to her. She smoothed her hair further into bondage.

"Here, feel the bristles." He pressed the instrument into her palms. She felt hundreds of tiny hairs across her fingertips, and thought of his hands. The wood handle was smooth and dry beneath her touch.

His hands brushed along her forearms to her shoulders. She hardly felt his damp lips on her throat. Calloused fingers absorbed warmth and softness from her white neck. They nestled in the loosened knot of hair. She was theirs.

Two nights later she moved into the small studio with the curtainless windows. She kept her job at the office, but only for three nights more. He wanted her home so he could sketch her hands each evening.

She didn't know why he wanted to sketch her diseased hands. She hated them. She thought of them as parasites on her healthy life-filled body. She often fancied his hands as hers, ignoring her own poor pair.

"I have a skin condition on my palms," she had explained to him at their first meeting. "It's been acting up lately." She looked down at her hands. She remembered strong, bony hands reaching out to her red palms. Pulling his arms with them. They lightly touched the small damp blisters covering the pink skin at her knuckles.

"Don't you go to a doctor for it?" They floated above her blisters.

"He says it's an allergic reaction or nerves." She felt their calouses, worn like badges. They ran gingerly along her palm, investigating.

"I wish I could give you new ones . . . take these from you." They looked up into her eyes. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," she answered them. "When I think about it."



They had smiled at her, lightly kissed her poisoned hands, and were gone. Their smile echoed of drifting through time. A different place was hers if only she followed them. If they possessed her hands, she could go free and live, she thought that night.

His sketches, those not of her or her hands, were generally dull. Different sizes and shapes of rocks or pieces of driftwood. Once she noticed an outline of a face but no features. She was amazed at what his hands chose to draw. Dead wood and empty vases abounded.

If her hands sketched, the pages would fill with color, she mused. Landscapes, or perhaps portraits. Yes, children's portraits. Maybe out in the country playing in green fields. It would be so easy not to think at all. But then his hands made her think . . . they commanded it of her.

Nights were spent in bed. Evenings, modeling before their canvases. Afternoons, cleaning their brushes and buying paints. Mornings, reading.

He insisted upon reading to her each morning. She didn't mind hearing his monotone coat the studio, for she listened to the hands. They played symphonies with the newspaper. They debated with each other, flicking from subject to subject. They made her laugh or cry. She was theirs.

"Nora," he demanded of her once, "how old are you?"

"I'm ageless."

"You're young," he corrected.

"How are your hands?" they would ask each morning.

"Fine, when I don't think of them."

Soon, simple line drawings along with detailed oil versions of her rapidly deteriorating hands crowded the studio. Other sketches and vague outlines of hands and feet, mostly deformed, some half-finished, dotted the walls.

One evening, she noticed, arthritis had begun at her knuckles. It was hereditary, she told him. Her hands now stiffened in position. His hands kissed each joint, each swollen tender spot, asking all the while, "Does it hurt?"

The stiffness became worse. Her red deformed hands slept motionless in her lap. Soon, she could no longer stretch the canvas across the wooden frames for him. Cleaning brushes became a painful ritual. His hands would dance around hers in bed,

investigating.

They sketched her hands even more then. They stood poised before a canvas holding a short piece of charcoal like a cigarette between their brown fingers. When not before the canvas, his hands constantly touched and spoke to hers. Persuading them slowly to leave her and come away with them, to be theirs. Although her hands couldn't act, they felt need for his hands.

They stopped asking about her pain after she told him of the pregnancy. There really was no other way for him to hear about it. So she told him. His hands heard about it too. It was four a.m. and they all lay awake.

"I'm pregnant," she said. Out through the windows, beyond building silhouettes, she saw a violet haze light the golden sky.

"Are you sure?"

"I've seen a doctor. He said it will be a miscarriage. If it's not, I'll have to have it removed. He said it wouldn't be normal." His hands rustled beneath the sheets. Then they were upon her belly.

"When will it happen?"

"Soon."

He dressed and was off to work, to sketch. She remained in bed all day, thinking, dozing, dreaming. She was lonely without the hands to talk with.

She knew he would come home from his work that evening. She pictured him in the small crowded office among other artists, none as talented as he. She couldn't picture their hands. Although he never spoke of his work to her, she could remember from her past. She could fantasize.

That night when grey light, seeping through windows from the street below, hauntingly made ghost hands dance above her, she shivered.

"Tell me what you're seeing," he demanded.

"Can't you feel them?" she whispered. They danced. Their white flesh flashed in and out of sight. Their fingers were crooked and twisted.

Watching the ghost hands, she felt his hands beside her, whispering. They could feel the dancing phantoms, she thought. They understood. She slept with their whisperings that night.

The next morning he was gone when she awoke. The ghost hands returned during her hours alone that day. Along with the

old deformed pale fingers there were tiny pink hands. They dipped and dove among the wild aged phantoms.

Into the evening she was still with the hands. He returned, almost unnoticed. His hands in the room once more made the ghosts retreat into the darkness.

"There's no way to keep it?" he began.

"The doctor said it won't be normal."

"That's not a reason. I could care for it."

"I don't want to take the chance." Her hands hurt. She didn't want to think now. She wanted his hands to comfort her, to talk to her of a different place.

"You don't want it, then?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"I'm not going to think about it. Maybe later." She looked down into her lap at her dead hands. Their blisters were no longer red, but grey. She wondered about the color of the being in her womb. Grey. She saw it then. "Why don't you paint anything living, any life?" She looked over at him from the bed.

He leaned against the windowpane, breathing small clouds against the glass. A grey streetlamp glow lit one side of his face. His fingers drummed on marble windowsills.

"Why should I paint life? Death plays a much larger part in my existence. And in yours." He grinned into the tiny cloud of moisture on the glass before him. "I don't want to think about it," he mimicked.

She sighed. His hands were silent. She watched him gaze into the disappearing and reappearing patch of vapor.

"You have to think about it sometime," she said. "Existence is life. You are so alive, don't you realize that ...?" Her voice had begun strong, but began to fade. He wasn't listening. She rearranged her hair on the pillow.

"We are all dying." His voice was a monotone. "Parts of us die constantly. Don't you feel them?" His hands slid up the windowpane and waited. She could see them breathing. *Take me*, she thought. *Take me there*.

"Why do you want it if it's not going to be normal?"

"We each have to live with death. We shouldn't be afraid of it in different forms. We should learn to understand it, respect it."

Dead imagery in his paintings startled her. She heard youngsters from the dark street below calling and laughing. She heard a crash, a pop, and the room was black. They had broken the

streetlamp, she thought. Her eyes slowly adjusted to a dimmer grey glow in the studio. He was no longer at the window.

She felt the hands at her cheeks. Their rough skin sanded her face as they whispered to her.

"Sleep with us . . . give in. Come away. Be protected, cared for, possessed."

She was there before the hands reached her throat.

The Promise

by FRANK MEYER

The grisly tale
of toxic Toxie!

"Chop, chop," Toxie said, out loud. "Chop, chop." Each time he said it he cut away at the thick limbs. Soon they would all be free from the trunk.

He had been at the special school four years now, and Dr. Roskopf, the psychiatrist, had finally decided that Toxie's academic potential actually existed. So the doctor had prescribed a program of increased school work. Toxie didn't care for that at all.

The most recent tests indicated that Toxie's IQ had long ago leveled out on a low-imbecile plateau. He could go to the bathroom by himself, when he felt like it, which was almost half the time. And feed himself. When he liked the food. When he didn't he poured it down inside his diapers. And dress himself. Shoe strings were no problem, since they only allowed him to wear loafers after what he'd done to the Woodling girl with the shoe-strings from his other shoes.

But of course, that whole incident had been rather quietly swept under the rug when the Woodling girl got away, somehow, and was never found.

Toxie held the hatchet away from where he'd been working and examined the results of his cutting. He had stolen the hatchet one warm spring afternoon when Hank the gardener had forgotten to lock up the tool shed. Toxie had quickly hidden the cold lovely

steel cutter in a sumac thicket outside the dining room.

He'd enlarged a little hideout in there, cutting away just the inner branches very carefully, so that no one could see him when he was inside. The trick was not getting caught there, which he managed by entering and leaving through a window that opened into the thicket from a dining room closet.

That's where he was now, working away briskly as staff and faculty ran all over the school grounds searching for him. Whenever he got loose he did whatever he'd planned and then made for his secret place. And they could never find him there. Never.

Later, he'd slip back inside, sneak up to his room, and crawl into his bed. And no one could ever figure out how he did it.

"Chop, chop," he grinned. "Chop, chop."

Toxie stopped again for a moment, and then resumed his task. He took little, short strokes with the hatchet, but he placed them carefully, one from one side, one from the other, so that the cut he was making slowly enlarged and deepened.

That was the way Hank used to cut, when Toxie would pull himself up by the bars in his room and look down, to see the old man at work about the grounds. Toxie was strong enough to hang there for as much as a half hour at a time.

Hank had gotten into a lot of trouble when he had to tell Dr. Roskopf that a hatchet was missing. The faculty whispered that old Hank was so "eaten up by guilt," that he just went away and never came back.

"Here today and—zip!—gone tomorrow," Toxie had heard the physical therapist explain it. Just like—zip!—how Miss Helmuth changed from being his favorite person of all.

Now he didn't like the new Miss Helmuth at all anymore. Before she'd been so nice to him. She'd brought him candy and apples if he could read the words she taught him.

But then, for no reason, she turned mean. And ordered him to read many more words than he could ever learn. And there were no more apples. And there was no more candy. And Toxie began to hate Miss Helmuth harder and harder.

So he didn't try any more. And she put belts around him that held him in his desk and made him feel caught and trapped and scared, and she'd hit him on the head with the pointer from the blackboard, and he'd cried, and dirtied himself, and turned his desk over, and—

Toxie had to stop working, because Dr. Roskopf and the

buxom dietician stopped to talk right beside his secret hiding place.

"It's possible," Dr. Roskopf said, in his smooth, sneaky voice, "that the increased school work could have made him retreat back into that pattern of violence of his, God forbid."

"What . . . would he do then? Where would he go?" the dietician begged, in a voice that almost cracked.

"Who knows with that one," Dr. Roskopf sighed. "Jane Helmuth indicated his reactions to being strapped down for his longer reading sessions made him very belligerent. Why, he actually tried to throw his desk out of her classroom while he was still belted into it. Had to stop him—physically—all by herself, so I understand. No small job for a woman her size. He may only have the brain of a six-year-old, but his muscles are twenty-eight."

"If we could just find Jane," the dietician whined. "I'm sure she could explain everything. I still think the two of them are off together somewhere, working on a lesson."

They drifted on past the clump of sumac.

"Chop, chop," Toxie said softly, smiling. He was almost finished. Soon it would be time to put his teacher down deep in the loamy soil. He was glad she wouldn't be lonesome there. And she would be so proud of him for not breaking his promise. The one he made when she caught him burying the kitten he stole from the school cat.

The one where he said he'd never, ever again bury anything with arms and legs.

The Book of Webster's

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

Dellie and Kee took off to see the country with a van, a cooler full of beer . . . and their own special way of seeing people.

The low-hung van trundled over the flat American midsection east to west at a pace as calculatingly maundering as an oversexed tailor's measuring tape. That matched the driver's unrushed, unconscious level, where Dell felt most marvelously and confidently himself, and where he mainly lived. Anyone watching the small-sized, rusted-out van for long—and always there were the miles of hitchhikers like cordovan eyelets in an uncinched and outflung belt—should have observed two dissimilar facts: The old, grey van and its two occupants did not actually seem to be headed anywhere in particular, yet something about their doggedly-maintained rate of speed suggested purpose.

Even when the fortyish, rather cockeyed driver doubled back, as they had done in Clarksburg for the female last weekend and yesterday for the male in Lima, electing on second thought to respond to lifted thumbs, no time had been wasted getting the hitchhikers into the van. Efficiency, methodology, and purpose were Dell's bywords and he never permitted anything to move ahead of them in his deeply-felt hierarchy of complex values.

Kee always rode on the patched-up captain's chair behind Dell, unless they were stopping to pick someone up. She kept a narrow container with a latch and a stenciled gardenia beside her at all times. She was a girl, pretty in an unexceptional way; depending

upon whether she moved hotly in sunlight or was washed, weary, by the goldening fluorescence of some midnight diner, she could seem as old as eighteen, as young as twelve. Kee was, in fact, fifteen.

When male hitchhikers were asked into their van, their world, Dell, reaching across to open the door, inclined his head toward the second seats. And Kee. Then he'd slam the door, wait until the male was in. None had objected. The few females thumbing—they had thinned during this timeless trek through the midwest—were offered the seat next to the driver. If they noticed the girl in the back at all, she was half-asleep. Possibly sprawled across the captain's chairs, bare girl knees tucked foetally to her slight bosom. In all such cases she looked closer to twelve than eighteen.

"Nighttime sure does come on early, all at once," Kee said from behind Dell. Her sigh was long-suffering.

"It allus does, this time of the year. Near the autumnal equinox." Dell did not look back or cock his head or do any of the things he might have, in conversation with an equal. He spoke with great clarity. "Day is gettin shorter. Considerably."

"Dell, you want a brew?" Kee wiggled around until her unclad legs, rather too long for her overall height, straddled the wide, capacious cooler between the seats.

"Of course I don't want to 'brew.'" Dell's hands jerked on the osteering wheel but he went on looking straight ahead. He'd switched on his low beams, despite the fact that there was as yet no need, and was attempting to make his bad eye focus with his good one. "Why in the world would I de-sire to boil, to ferment?"

Kee kicked her bare heels against the cooler, laughed quite loudly. "You are *so smart*, Dell! Honest to God."

"It's m'bible I have to thank." The middle-aged man patted an inside jacket pocket where the tattered paperback *Webster's* he'd read in prison over and over and over again was kept. He'd committed many of the words and their definitions to memory. Arduously. "Man who don't know his own language and how to employ it proper is a guddamn fool, unfit for livin. Man who knows it rises above the herd like a eagle—is reborn like a Phoenix."

"Isn't that the pure truth?" Kee squirmed, scratched behind her left knee. "Well, can I have a brew, Dell? Dellie?"

"Beer, it's *beer*, guddamnit to perdition!" His toe on the van accelerator reacted to the swift tensing of his calf muscle and he

nearly trod down, hard. Instead, he allowed his long, well-manicured fingers to roam restlessly around the wheel. "Not yet, Kee. Not till I hereby *pro-claim* you can."

Kee, starting to sag sullenly back against her chair, already folding her arms across her lightweight turquoise sweater, stopped. A note in his voice, familiar, enlivening, made Kee sit up straight. "You stoppin'?" She snatched the container with the gardenia from the top of the cooler and jiggled it on her lap, laughing. "Yew are, right?"

His head nodded solemnly. From her position, it was a neatly and quite closely trimmed head, the hair an undistinctive, sparse, mousy brown, the ears set out slightly. His neck was short, fairly thick, and at such times as this it pinked as if recently exposed to the sun. "It's the time," he said at last.

For several seconds more they rode in silence. Then, "See him," Dell commanded without raising his voice, without pointing.

Kee leaned forward, waiting for a male figure with its back to them, walking along the right side of the highway, to assume shape. Now it was dusk, thin shadows from distant trees moved ahead of them up the road, and the young man who took form in Dell's obstinate low beam seemed momentarily nude. "He's cute," Kee breathed.

"You got him," said Dell, and tooted the unobtrusive van horn.

Shirtless, wearing cut-off jeans, the youth dangled his long arms at his sides, a gallon gasoline can in one hand, and his tanktop drooping from the other. He looked angrily self-absorbed; it took a second toot to alert him before Dell was easing onto the berm, two yards ahead of the boy. Kee, staring past the back of the van and through the rear window, saw the anger change to relief and jubilation. He loped lightly toward them, Nike-clad feet kicking up white clouds of dust—

And Dell, reaching across, opening the door, greeting him. "Climb in back, partner," he said, grinning. The drifting left eye was only partly visible. Dell's thumb-flick was a direction signal.

He got in beside Kee at the same second Dell slammed the right front door and, not gunning it, eased back onto the road. This was the old highway; to the east, a multi-laned monster roared toward the west but, as Dell often said, he was jist an oldfashioned kinda man who never rushed.

"Gosh, am I glad you two stopped!" The boy grinned from

the girl to the man at the wheel.

"Yes, you are," Dell said seriously. "What transpired?"

"I beg pardon?"

"I asked you what happened." He sounded conspicuously but temperately put-out about needing to rephrase. "Did your vehicle suffer af-flicting disabilities?"

"Not disabilities exactly." The younger man was trying not to notice Kee's disconcerting stare. Heat she was giving off fairly shimmered. "My gas gauge is busted. Had to jog almost ten miles to the closest station." He still perched gingerly upon the edge of the second seat, looking for his smile. "I forgot about the gauge when I left Terre Haute, Friday afternoon. Crap, I had maybe another three, four miles to go before I'd have gotten back to my old Buick—except for you good Samaritans."

"We're just Americans," Kee said, apparently surprised. "Like you." The fading sun blushed against one soft cheek and she looked exceedingly but not hopelessly young.

"Like in the Bible, I meant," the hitchhiker explained. "Remember?"

"Samaritan," Dell said flatly, expressionlessly, as if reading from a page before his eyes. "Noun. One of the people of Samaria. *II Kings xvii.*" He said it, "Double-I Kings ex-vee-eye-eye."

It was still inside the van but for the quietly humming motor. Dell had tuned it himself immediately after taking it from a shopping center south of Harrisburg. There was also a steady clinking noise rising from Kee's container.

"What you got there, miss?" asked the boy.

"Just my tampon box," she replied. She stopped shaking it and raised it to his coloring face for a clear inspection.

He promptly turned toward the driver. "My name's Negley. Lewis Negley? I can point out my car when we get closer." No one spoke when he paused. Lewis cleared his throat. "I go to Indiana State, y'know. That's where Larry Bird played college basketball."

The girl, momentarily ignored, made a show of raising her long legs, planting her feet noisily on the cooler. "Who's he anyway?"

Negley, amazed, gaped at her. He wondered if she might be kidding. "Why, he's—"

"He's one of them overpaid N.B.C. athaletes," Dell interjected.

Hands moved restlessly around the steering wheel. "White boy, tall as Gawd."

"N.B.A.," Lewis corrected. "Gosh, though, I don't think he's overpaid. I mean, sir, he has led the Celtics to—"

"They's all ineffably overpaid." Dell, without raising his voice, succeeded in sounding like thunder rolling back from the front seat. "Doncha know other players *have* t'let 'the Birdman' score and look fancy?"

"No," Lewis replied, blinking. "Why would they have to do that?"

"Cause they got t'have white folks to oc-cupy them seats. And there's so many non-Caucasians, they got t'protect Bird." Dell hadn't used any one of the vast lexicon of demeaning words for blacks but his sneer left the implication. Lewis thought with surprise that this was the only animation he'd heard in the driver's voice. "Them *others*, they's re-imbursed t'let the white hope put on a show. To excel."

Evening breeze whipped by Dell's window, rolled down several inches.

"C'mere." Kee, to his left in the grouping shadows. Before he'd had to answer Dell. "Wanta tell yew something."

Lewis faced her, grinning, glad to break his conversation with Dell. Then her chipped red nails clutched his forearm and dragged until he lowered his ear to her mouth. "What?" he asked, incapable of additional words.

"You're awful fuckin cute," she said in a stage whisper.

"... well," Lewis said simply.

"No, you're a *hunk*." Kee whispered noisily, and bit the lobe of his ear. "You wanta *do* it now? Huh?" The bite had hurt but she had both hands on his biceps now, and men didn't let women know they'd hurt them. Her breath was like steam. "You might as well do it. *He* makes me do it all the time." Her well-munched index finger jabbed vindictively toward the front seat; her whisper was no less audible. "Lewis, he's a pervert. Y'know? A fuckin molester."

"One decade back, there wasn't no white men in thet league." Dell pronounced it "de-cade." He was faced forward; perhaps, Lewis thought, he's half-deaf. "Y'can check me out with statistics but there weren't nary a one."

"Mr. Dell, I—"

"Cornholer flat-out stole my cherry," Kee said in the raspiest

whisper Lewis had ever heard. He wanted to shush her, to make her stop. But everything in her face from her ragged widow's peak and badly-plucked eyebrows and nearly colorless eyes to her pugnacious pug nose and maddeningly pouting little mouth challenged Lewis. If this were true, he had to *do*—something. But how could he deal with the mature man driving this rickety old van at fifty-five miles an hour? Kee looked ready to bawl. "Ain't you going to *do* something?"

"Don't you *read*, boy? All them N.B.C. *glandular* cases, they half-stealin all that big money," Dell was saying. Lewis's lips were dry and he'd just licked them. "What they gone *do* for a livin' after retirement age, tell me that!"

Lewis, murmuring, "I don't know," to answer another question entirely, tried to ease along the fringe of manners, away from the wide-eyed girl child; he said something else, but no one knew what, least of all Lewis.

"It's gospel *truth*, Lewis!" Kee stage-whispered energetically. She filled the inside of the steady-rolling little van with her enviable youth and vitality, her sex, her untimely and disconcerting puzzle of vulnerability and command. "I *mean* it, I don't lie!" She had a way of holding her mouth as if she were sizing him and was so worked-up that her clinking tampon container had slipped off her firm/round-thighed/flat-bellied lap, and she pressed his cheeks between moist palms, just the tips of her splotchy nails gouging Lewis's cheeks. "I was a innocent virgin—and that ol' molester, he *kidnapped* me, honey. Now he's sexually abusin' me right across the fuckin country!" Tears popped into her eyes. "Damn your hairless little nuts, Lewis, what kind of man *are* you?"

"You watch your fuckin tongue, girl!" Dell, abruptly. Again there was animation and Lewis's head spun to face front, his heart vaulting sickeningly. "Mind your guddamn language!"

Lewis misunderstood, was eager to deny it all. "I'm no policeman or judge, sir; but what—"

Dell's face appeared above the front seat. His bad eye was laboring; when a car sped past with blazing lights, Lewis saw the lid flutter and viscous tears drip down his left cheek. Was he grimacing, or grinning? "Keep outa what don't concern you." Looking back at the road, he readjusted the van's positioning in the lane but it had not veered in speed at all. "She can *declaim* what she de-sires *relative* t'sexual vi-o-lations and that but I shall *not* let a chile curse that way. Isn't proper. Kee, you tell Lewis

you have been profane. Hear? Pro-fane and *perfidious*."

Expressionless, she nodded hastily. "I been profane," she said cheerfully. "And—what was that other two-dollar word, Dell? Dellie?"

He had not answered, and didn't. Some low-pitched sound midway between muttering or growling and humming issued thickly from the front.

"Kee, I do want to help." Lewis leaned back carefully, just slightly, sweating heavily. "I'll have to know the exact truth if I'm going—well, to know *how* to help. To get you away." His whisper was only for her. He glanced quickly forward. "How old *are* you? Where did it happen . . . the rape?"

Her eyes were enormous, sheened. "I barely had my boobies, Lewis." The eyes widened and he saw for a moment how lovely she was going to be. "I on'y had some peach fuzz, down there?" She glanced at her lap at his serious expression, then burst into laughter, slapping both her open palms stingingly against his naked chest. "I swan, yew *are* cute, Lewiel!" One hand trailed deeper, brushing. "Can't yew tell when a woman is joshin yew?"

He'd stopped breathing. He reached down to retrieve her tampon container from the van floor; handing it to her, he edged away, crimson. "I never knew any girl could possibly kid about a thing like that." While he was mad, he was apologizing; basically. Recognizing it, he forced a chuckle that was liquidy and came too much from the nostrils. Craning his neck, he quested through the van's front window for his car. "It'll be coming up any second now."

"Will it?" Kee said wide-eyed, and howled and hooted her hilarity.

"Lewis Negley, you just ig-nore Kee now 'cause she's a congenital liar." Dell's tone was again even, flatter than the highway reaching out before the stolen van with the pale dual beams of his uremic lights. "The sort of barefaced de-ceiver who allus makes up stories about sex." No inflection suggested the older man had made a joke. The wind was dying down. Dell cranked up the window contrarily and the interior of the van seemed to reek of odors Lewis could not fathom. "Kee, chile, you inform our *companyun* of the truth. Now."

"Aw, Dell, do I got to?" she asked. No reply but her pause was a flicker. She caught Lewis's gaze, dropped her eyes. "Well . . . Dell here's *my daddy*."

Lewis gasped. Before replying, he studied her intently. "For real?" His smile essayed a comeback. "That the truth, Kee?"

Toying with a straight but dangling strand of darkish hair, she nodded her grave earnestness. "I'm his on'y daughter. An' we travel this whole, wide, wonderful ol' country of ours, the two of us." Her nodding made Lewis join in; she was as fresh and sweet as a four-year-old. "We go absolutely *everwhere* together, my sweet daddy an' me, Lewis."

"That's kind of nice, isn't it," he murmured.

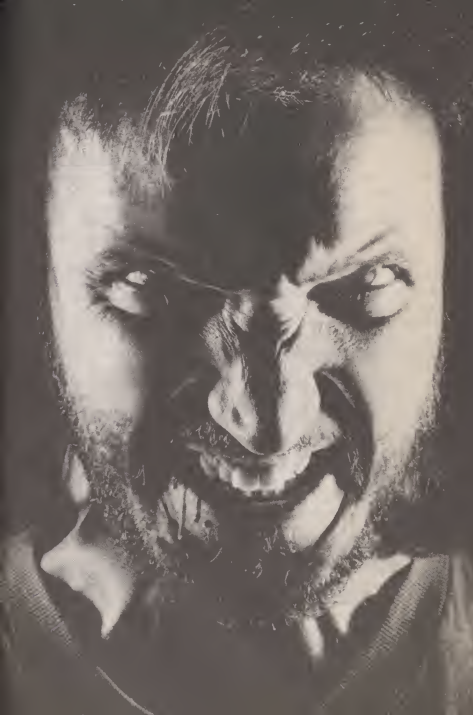
"Course it is," she said, eyes rolling. "He shows me the sights and now and then, just to have us a leetle harmless fun, Daddy parks somewheres, and we get in back on the mattress where he hauls out his big thing, and . . ."

"Dear Lord," Lewis said, shaken. Dell's head was an unmoving icon above his neck-rest, as uncommunicative as Stonehenge. Lewis imagined the man's left eye, winking pus. Oh *Lord*, what had he gotten into?

Kee's detonation of laughter was her most unnervingly boisterous yet. She was literally convulsed for a moment. Gasping, shrieking giggles like screams, she threw her legs in the air, pounded first on Dell's neck-rest and then on young Lew Negley, wherever her small fists landed. "Sumbitch, you b'lieved *that* one too!" Sitting up straight, she wrapped a playful arm round Dell's enigmatic neck. "Dellie, this ol' hunk of a boy, he b'lieves everything yew says to him!"

The man's only answer was his large right hand moving from the wheel, grasping Kee's wrist and part of her hand; a powerful thrust. She sailed back against her captain's chair as Lewis, as far away as possible, pressed himself against the door. "It's only a little further," he said huskily. Kee was softly crying but he didn't think she was hurt. "My car, I mean. An old two-tone Buick? I'm sure it's only a quarter of a mile now." Two possibilities occurred to Lewis then, piggyback; the second, chilling one—*would they let him out?*—prompting caution. "Y'know, it's sort of close in here; so maybe if I—"

"*I tole you to tell him the truth, guddamnit!*" Although he continued to look ahead, the back of Dell's neck was fire-engine red. A tiny muscle under one bat-wing throbbed as if independent of him. Lewis couldn't see Dell's right hand on the steering wheel. "Tell him, chile, or you ain't gettin any of what you *de-sires* tonight."



Kee hadn't been crying. Now her eyes bulged with the greater effort of controlling herself. She was rapidly nodding, cheeks filled with air. She squeezed the words between her lips. "We are *married*, Lewis; man and wife." It was a real whisper. "Dellie's my husbin'."

Some of the tension was dissipated at once. Whether he'd heard or not, the twitching muscle in Dell's throat had slowed.

"I have not been a proper hostess," Kee said abruptly and something excruciatingly cold was crammed against Lewis's slightly-averted cheek and neck. He jumped as if he'd been shot, and jerked to face Kee. "That's a cold brew from our very own cooler."

In taking the can, Lewis looked into the open container on the floor. Something moved, *sloshed* with the ice. Then Kee's soft shoulder blocked his view, she had the lid locked snugly, and she was pointing out the rear windows with an affectionate, rather dreamy smile. "We done passed us a two-tone Buick," Kee said wonderingly. His glance rose in time for him to see his own car across the highway, dwindling into the distance. "That jalopy wasn't yourn, was it, Lewis?"

"Yes!" He leaned toward the front seat. "That's *it!* That was my *car!*"

"I fundamentally believed it might be," Dell allowed.

"Then—why didn't you *stop?*"

"Girl was bein hospitable." The quickest of glances, the wink of the good eye. "Little lady was fetchin you refreshments, Lew Negley. You got t'give her a opportunity t'make amends for all them naughty lies."

"Could we, well, pull off the road while I drink my brew?" Looking back again, his car was a speck, a spot. The van trundled on.

"Your language is as un-precise as the girl's." Dell's face showed, only in profile this time, his smile a clone of its predecessors. Polish, that smile had polish. Purpose, too, although what in God's name his purpose could be for a twenty-year-old kid who obviously had little or no money, Lewis couldn't conceive. "You ain't no Phoenix or no eagle, Lewis."

"Would you let me out here, please?" He'd asked it politely, carefully. Dell was facing forward and Lewis was piercingly aware of the girl on the captain's seat. "I can drink my beer while I jog back, see," he was cold inside, something at the top of his spine

was spasming, "—for my wheels. Mrs. Dell? Mr. Dell?"

Kee howled. It sounded like that and he glanced at her, saw the start of another scarcely controllable outburst. When she had them, the mounds of her high, small breasts jiggled beneath the lightweight sweater which ended above a neat, staring navel and her white belly was sucked in until it was absolutely concave, apparently fleshless, as if she did not eat. Or did not eat what others consumed. "*We are not married, either, Lewis,*" she gasped. The tip of her coated tongue poked out from her deep, wet mouth and added to the rest of her ambience to suggest a woman either dying for lack of oxygen or deep in the throes of consuming climax. "*Lewie, you hunk—we're partners.*"

Lewis rose into the air as if levitated, bounded high. He imagined for one instant that a crash had occurred or was imminent, and looked everywhere—he felt the unpaved earth as the van wheels rattled their protest like four aged priests shaking shaman's sticks. This wasn't a road—it wasn't even a *path*! Dell had simply whipped the wheel of the van to the right into an untenanted field and they were bouncing across it at the same trundling pace as if Dell believed they were still on the old road.

"This here's good," Dell said evenly, flatly, and braked sharply. Lewis, off balance, shot forward, going "oof" as his slender upper body rammed the front seat. Dell was opening his door clangingly, dropping lightly to the ground. "This'll do her *fine*!"

"C'mon," Kee ordered, gesturing to Lewis to open the door on his side. And Kee was out the other, looking small and little-girl and gaily secretive as she peered up to see if he was coming. A mental image of arriving in a bus at Butler Fieldhouse in Indy for a football game, and the excitement, the camaraderie as everybody clambered down full of fight songs filtered through Lewis's mind. "Come on now, Lewis!"

Dell was chuckling noiselessly as Lewis got out, beside the forty-year-old man. Dell was only slightly taller, as he'd thought, but long-armed and rangy; of a piece. He said, "You de-sired that I pull off, so I did," and Lewis nodded, not daring to hope.

Kee hadn't come around the van yet and Lewis noticed that there was a last glimmering of sifting light working cryptic designs in the saturnine western sky. And that the nondescript van had been parked parallel, exactly, to the highway—deep into the deserted field—and that he saw no neighboring farmhouses, and that all he could see out on the distant highway was a rare, paired

flash of light as another unrushed, oldfashioned driver like Dell maundered wearily toward home.

Kee, there, her back to the van. She skinned out of her lightweight sweater promptly. Dell's same smile was back, Lewis saw as he glanced with incredulous eyes toward the man. Kee was nude before Lewis could call out or know just what he wanted to say, and never learned what that was. She didn't look undernourished, now, and she wasn't giggling. Her body in the uncertain lighting formed a face, a dumb kid's-drawing face of purplish nipples the size of beer bottle bottoms and her belly-button nostril and the dark-shadowed beard of tangled pubic hair which spread to her upper thighs.

"It would not be *de*-corous to turn the chile down," Dell said. Flatly. He'd removed his own white shirt. Surprisingly, to Lewis, he wore an immaculate t-shirt which, in a second, was smoothed carefully over the open van's window, next to his shirt. Kee's clothing was in a pile at her feet and she was scratching herself. Dell slipped the loop of his belt out of its restraining buckle and Lewis saw, too, that he had something in the palm of his left hand. It was getting very dark fast.

"So. You want another brew first?" Kee crossed one ankle idly over the other but didn't approach him. It was a nice night and neither Kee nor Dell appeared cold, or even excited. It was, it seemed, no different to them. "We got Schlitz, an' Bud Light, and there might be one Coors left."

"I-I'm fine," Lewis insisted. He hadn't opened the beer they'd given him on the road but he ripped away the tab, now, drank deeply. He chuckled, belched, thought of being with Karen the first time she ever had a beer or sex. Finishing it, he swiped his mouth with the back of his hand and laughed. "*Great* brew! Thank you! But, see, my ol' Buick's lights don't have low beams. I wouldn't want to blind the other drivers, right?" Neither Dell nor Kee answered. "So I'd better just jog on back, okay? All right?"

"No," Dell replied. "Lewis, it ain't 'okay.'"

Whatever he'd had in his left hand was still there, the long, well-groomed fingers closed over it. In his right hand, he held an automatic. His belt was loosened—the gun, Lewis saw, had been concealed behind the man's back. And his fly was open.

"We shall all *as*-cend into the back," Dell announced evenly, the nose of his weapon shifting minimally, directionally, "and we'll permit you to se-lect your *own* brand. Brand of *beer*." Dell said

the last word loudly, glancing toward Kee, who'd preceded them eagerly to the rear of the van. Lewis looked at her bifurcated rump as she got in, and then it was his turn. From up the road a semi yowled like something prehistoric. When Lewis hedged, the automatic jabbed into the back of his ribs with stunning force and pain. "Christ on a crutch, Lewis Negley, you got somethin against sexual congress?"

Red velvety curtains were drawn, lights were on, Kee looked gaunt and bleached and, body-wise, a curious construct. It was as if someone had tried to manufacture the body of a teenage girl to go with her angel's face but let it boil or simmer till it had gone crinkled, livid, blotchy and freckled infelicitously. He wondered if he could make it with Kee, if there was no other way and he had to.

He'd had to stop, just inside. A bed with a thin foam mattress took up almost all the space and it had been efficiently made, then readied for use: a spotless sheet was coyly pulled back from two snowy pillows, and lying next to them were the several garden tools.

Their incongruity seemed the last straw to Lewis. His head began to throb, to pound, unmercifully. A small, unstained shovel, and a spade, and gleaming shears had all been the obvious recipients of attentive care. Kee's cooler was in a corner of the bed; her tampon container with the stenciled gardenia lay upon the cooler.

"Get into the bed, Lewis." Sensing the next vicious thrust of the automatic, Lewis crawled quickly onto the bed, but instead of climbing under the covers, he knelt to look back at Dell with mounting horror. Dell was naked, too, like Kee, except for flamboyant bikini undershorts. "Lawd, college boy, don't they in-struct you about anything at that college of yours?"

"I am not taking my clothes off." Lewis glanced over his shoulder at the teenager. "No matter what." He reached into the side pocket of his cutoffs to tug out a crumpled five-dollar bill. "This is all I got. See?"

Kee eased the bill from his raised hand and pressed it beneath one pillow in the manner of a dutiful daughter smoothing a momento into the family Bible. She laughed; although it was different from her earlier noises of amusement, Lewis hoped it might be a good sign. "You cute thing, you got a lot more'n that. More'n you even *know* you got. Why, Dellie and me, we found out a

hundred times more about both males' and females' bodies than anyone ever learned before."

Dell was making the part-muttering, part-humming sound as he shut the van door and locked it. He knelt at the foot of the bed as if in prayer. When Lewis edged away from him, toward Kee, he was aware of the stink he'd inhaled before. It was stronger, now; pervasive. But he didn't think it was Kee. Dell lifted into sight the object that he'd palmed and Lewis saw that it was a book.

He saw, too, that naked Kee had picked up the garden shears, had spread them, and was holding the glittering blades—without touching him—around his throat.

The book rose before Dell's cockeyed vision and the automatic in his other hand remained aimed at Lewis's forehead with the steadiness that Dell had maintained on the road. WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY was printed on the front of the paperback. Lewis saw the strips of Scotch transparent tape that had held the book valiantly together were peeling away now, from use.

"Solemnize," said Dell, distinctly. "To perform a ceremony or solemn rite; to reverence." The eyes showed above the top of the old paperback, the left dizzily fixed on the ceiling of the van, the right almost amiably regarding the shaking boy. "To dig-nify, as with a ceremony." Dell lowered the paperback, carefully closed it. "To cele-brate."

Kee's noise-making made him jump. She'd lifted the lid from the cooler; she was motioning to Lewis, her smile nearly the madly mischievous way it had been before. He opened his mouth to say he wasn't and, from the corner of his eye, saw the expression—the visible, lubricious animation—in Dell's usually-somber face. Lewis set his jaw and crawled the rest of the way over the mattress to the cooler, and looked down at the half-melted ice, greyly swarming on the surface like anemic turds.

But his movements were too deliberate for Kee, who cast the shears aside, snatched his hands, and thrust them into the icy water. He grazed several cans of beer, began to fish one out, felt something *else* brush against the pimpling skin of his inner wrist. Clutching nothing, he began withdrawing his hands in revulsed suspicion, aware that there were *yet other* things in the cooler.

"Don't they teach you nothin at that college?" Kee echoed Dell, in disgust. Impatiently, she cupped both her hands, plunged them into the cooler, and promptly brought them back out. She

held a vividly colored can with a familiar logo—

And a woman's breast.

Lewis grunted once, deep in his throat. He looked at it with completely unbelieving eyes and without commotion; he was so unaccepting that he didn't blink. Most of what registered was the feeling that a mistake had been made, although, inside, a memory was surfacing about an older brother who had been in Nam. Wally'd seen his own fingers lying on the ground and had not recognized them because he was accustomed to seeing them *attached* to something.

Possibilities went skittering through Lewis's mind as he tried to be fair, needed to be reasonable, badly: It was some elaborate gag; yeah, okay, Kee and ol' Dell had gone to a novelty store—or, maybe the girl had simply *made* this GREY, WRINKLED HORROR herself, *from* . . . He winced, shook his head, concentrated. These two knew the head of the frat Lewis was pledging, uh-huh, this was part of the hazing, *and* . . . He pressed his eyes shut until they hurt in the corners. It *wasn't* a breast, at all; he had mistaken it for—for something *different*, and—

Eyes open, he saw with unavoidable, unmistakable clarity the seeping, choppy edges where IT had been sliced off, only a trace of DDDRIED BLOOD LEFT after it had soaked, for days, in THAT HARMLESS-LOOKING ORDINARY SOFT DRINK CCCOOLER—his mind squealed like a piglet trapped in a slaughterhouse pen . . .

"From Clarksburg," Kee explained, brightly. Carelessly, she squatted on the mattress, carefully rested the breast on the snowy pillow closest to Lewis, offhandedly picked up her tampon container. Thrusting it out past Lewis to Dell, her expression was earnest, her gaze teasing the youth. "She was somethin' *else*, that lady! Why, she had scarce got in next to my Dellie when she was all *over* him like white on rice! Lewie, it was *disgustin'!*"

Dell: immediately to the rear. But Lewis looked blankly from Kee to the breast again, back and forth, breast to face to SEVERED GREY DEAD UGLINESS. He could not move his body until he felt Dell brush against him, then he leaped and saw that the man had discarded his bright bikini shorts. Image: sparse spiky greying hair; ropy but horse-long marbly-veined and twangy. "You needn't *dis-robe*, Lewis Negley," Dell said softly; "we'll do it, and tuck you in for the night."

Dell reached around the quaking boy to where Kee still knelt

holding out her gardenia-stenciled container, and dropped one more penny into it.

She'd gotten a B in arithmetic once. Kee counted quickly, gasped. "That makes it ninety-nine! I mean, the hunk does." Wonder in her voice. She looked to her partner with childlike awe. "Almost an even hunderd!"

"Chile," Dell nodded, pleased and proud, "we'll be goin' past the first magic cen-tury afore we cross the Missouri border!"

"NO!" Lewis thundered in the face of detached, sadistic destiny. He shot forward in the motion of a football tackle, dove out the back of the van, fell bruisingly on ground and pavement. "No!" and he was up, running faster than he had run when he failed to make the Indiana State track team, but straightlining it down the darkening highway. "No!" his night cry trailed behind him like a cartoon speech balloon—"NOOOooo..."

Dell held himself with lover's hands where the boy's outflinging foot had accidentally sunk in and made him drop his automatic. He smiled from ear to ear because of the pain and stared redly at Kee and the intrushing darkness at the van door. Bless the chile, she was closing and opening them garden shears, fast—*snick-SNACK, snick-SNACK*, like some pre-historic lizard thing with sharp metallic jaws. Bare ass, she was stooping to jump out and run after Lewis Negley when Dee caught her shoulder from behind and threw her back onto the makeshift bed. Hobbled but gasping his noiseless laughter, he slammed the doors shut and nonchalantly stepped over the girl, each of them naked, headed for the front of the van.

"You ain't lettin him go?" She scrambled to her knees, scooted to her post at the broken-down captain's chair. "Dellie, he's ninety-nine!"

Firing up the engine and peeling away nearly threw Kee to the van floor, but Dell said nothing. Then she saw his hideous face in the rearview mirror and the eye was drizzling pus, unchecked, and Kee felt reassured, joined Dell in staring passionately out the windshield while the washed-out beams bleached stains in the new night. Dell had his big foot pressed nearly flat; he was going much faster than he liked but didn't appear to mind. Seeing his hunched shoulders and the back of his reddening neck and the batwing ears looming against the wide windshield was like sitting behind a man looking at a movie screen, and Kee took his humming bloodlust, turned it into a filmic fun festival, a fantasy frolic.

"Get him," she moaned, eyes huge and lips wet. "Get that ol' roadrunner this time!"

"*There he is,*" Dell said softly, and pointed.

The boy was tiring fast, running along the highway center stripe; he appeared thin, frail, not quite real in the bleeding headlight beams. Still lifting his knees high but in slow motion as if parodying a marathon runner, he acknowledged the van whooshing up behind him only with a darted glance over his right shoulder. His scar-tissue white face could have belonged to anybody who was about to be murdered without knowing why.

"He is a blade of grass, a *weed*," Kee breathed, "last one left on a big ol' rich man's lawn, and *we're* the power mower that will make him special!"

"He is a fully-growed male human animal," Dell recited his correction, "he has been called Lewis Negley, he is number ninety-nine—and this is what *we* do. They's nothin more to it than that."

Together then, they saw why Lewis had remained on the road. To their right, half a football field ahead of him, was his car. And farther off to that direction, lights going on for the night, was an old drive-in theater, several automobiles filing turgidly into it from a dirt road. They were close enough for the drivers to see Lewis Negley, and the van, too far away for meaningful pursuit.

So the van slowed; dropped back. The boy, risking another glance behind, looked surprised and then, quite distinctly, he realized that Dell was *pace*ing him. When Lewis accelerated, faintly, so did the van, and the motor was racing, *vroom/vroom*. Kee, kicking out her naked legs and clapping her hands with joy, saw the boy try valiantly to find a real third wind, to make a strong finish.

"By gawd, they *didn't* teach him nothin' at that college." Dell, half-grinning as he squinted around at her. The pus from the bad eye had run all the way down his long, muscled body; Kee saw that his member was erect, engorged. "Not nothing *necessary*, leastwise."

He looked forward again in time to see the youth putting out a reaching arm, fingers groping toward the door of his old junker.

Dell floored it.

The door of Lewis Negley's car was partly open when the

stolen van's right front fender slammed into the boy. He was crushed there, left arm atop the hood of the steaming van with the fingers splayed as if he had been drowning and thrown up his hand in a final quest for something to hold onto. Dell fumbled for reverse, muttering, pulled back. When Lewis Negley didn't crumble to the pavement, it was clear that he was either wedged between car door and interior or that the whole length of his right side was stapled to the edge of the door.

In neutral, panting and excited, Dell tapped the accelerator. Bloodstuff was on the windshield now. Lewis Negley's face was raised toward him with the wounded eyes wide, blood pumping from his ruined, working mouth. Shrugging, Dell cut his steering wheel to the left and raced back out onto the road. Dead voices in his brain drowned out the shouting from the drive-in theater line.

Kee pummeled Dell's shoulders. "His *eyes!*" she shouted. "They was *open!*"

"He's dyin," the man mumbled. "Give me my *Webster's* from in back." He had driven only a few hundred yards and already slowed to a speed considerably under the limit.

She handed him his dictionary, still protesting. "He kin *identify* us, Dellie!" When he didn't reply, she sulked back against her captain's seat, arms crossed over her small, bare breasts. Under her breath, she added, "He *could* live *that* long."

She thought she heard the sound of a page or pages being torn out and then, for a long while, the man at the wheel remained silent again. She couldn't tell what Dell was doing, didn't care, not even when the van drifted erratically across the center line before Dell righted it, threw a big wad of paper out the open window. She hadn't had sex with the hunk, didn't get his thing to add to the collection in the cooler, wasn't even certain they wouldn't have to take the ninety-ninth penny out of her container with the gardenia, and now her Dellie wouldn't even go back to make sure Lewis was dead.

"Kee? Kee, girl?"

His voice rose, drifted back to her stickily, like ventilation from a crypt. "What d'yew want?" she asked sullenly.

"Girl, it don't matter no how." His face, glimpsed in the rear-view mirror when a car gushed past, was pasty, homely, almost kind. The bad eye was dry. "It is all in-con-se-quen-tial. A triv-i-al-i-ty. You could look 'em up in the book. And what they *all*

mean is, it purely *does not matter*." Yawning, he switched on the wipers to cleanse the windshield of what remained of many miniature corpses, and Lewis Negley. When he winked at her with his good eye, the universe disappeared. "*Nothin* does—but the Phoenix."

STOP SCREAMING

back issues of *Night Cry*
are still available!

- 3 issues only \$9.95
- 2 issues only \$6.95
- 1 issue only \$3.95



HURRY! Send me the following issues of *Night Cry*:

- ☐ Summer '85 ☐ Fall '85 ☐ Winter '85

Special Alternative

- ☐ Trivia from the *Twilight Zone*

I've enclosed

- ☐ \$9.95 for 3 issues
☐ \$6.95 for 2 issues
☐ \$3.95 for 1 issue

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Mail to: *Twilight Zone*, P.O. Box 252, Mt. Morris, IL 61054-0252

Canadian & foreign orders add \$1 per issue, payable in U.S. funds.
Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

READER SURVEY

Here at *Night Cry* we bring you the best, most frightening magazine we can. You can help us continue to publish the best possible *Night Cry* by filling out this two-page questionnaire and sending it back to:

Delores Fiore, Office Assistant

Night Cry

Montcalm Publishing

800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017

1. Are you male or female?
☐ Male
☐ Female
2. What is your age group?
☐ Under 18
☐ 18-24
☐ 25-34
☐ 35-44
☐ 45-54
☐ Over 54
3. What is your marital status?
☐ Married
☐ Single
☐ Separated/Divorced
☐ Widowed
4. What is the highest level of formal education you have attained?
☐ Still attending high school
☐ Finished some high school
☐ Graduated from high school
☐ Still attending college
☐ Finished some college
☐ Graduated from college
☐ Postgraduate education
5. Which of the following best describes your present employment status?
☐ Employed full time
☐ Employed part time (thirty hours per week or fewer)
☐ Not presently employed
☐ Full-time homemaker
☐ Full-time student
6. What range best describes your total household income before taxes in 1984?
☐ Under \$10,000
☐ \$10,000-14,999
☐ \$15,000-19,999
☐ \$20,000-24,999
☐ \$25,000-29,999
☐ \$30,000-39,999
☐ \$40,000-49,999
☐ \$50,000-74,999
☐ \$75,000 or more
7. What three *Night Cry* stories from the last year are your favorites?

8. What writers would you like to see stories from in *Night Cry*?

9. *Night Cry* isn't currently available by subscription, but we're considering adding a subscription program. If we do, will you consider subscribing to *Night Cry*?
☐ Yes
☐ No

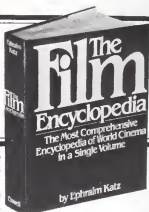
10. Where did you purchase this copy of *Night Cry*?
- ☐ Convenience store
 - ☐ Supermarket
 - ☐ Discount/Variety
 - ☐ Bookstore
 - ☐ Other
11. How would you rate *Night Cry*'s covers?
- ☐ Excellent
 - ☐ Good
 - ☐ Average
 - ☐ Poor
12. Are you familiar with our sister publication, Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone Magazine*?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
13. Are you a *Twilight Zone* subscriber?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
14. How did you hear about TZ?
- _____
- _____
15. What other horror, fantasy, science fiction, or mystery magazines do you read regularly?
- _____
- _____
- _____
16. Do you belong to any book clubs?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
17. If so, please list them.
- _____
- _____
- _____
18. Have you purchased any products by mail or by telephone in the last twelve months?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
19. Would you rather see *Night Cry* remain a digest-sized magazine or switch to standard magazine size?
- ☐ Remain a digest
 - ☐ Switch to standard magazine size

MOVIE BUFFS:

Why the new **FILM ENCYCLOPEDIA** is "the most comprehensive encyclopedia of world cinema in a single volume"

That's what the subtitle says. The prestigious *Library Journal* agrees: "easily fulfills the claim of the subtitle." Here's why...

over 7,000 entries — and no skimping ★ over 3 million words ★ covers stars, directors, supporting players, writers, composers, designers, etc. ★ studio profiles ★ complete Academy Award winners in top 7 categories, year by year ★ filmmaking ★ cross-referenced for stage names ("Constance Keane" sends you to Veronica Lake) ★ how movies developed ★ film groups and events ★ technical terms ★ detailed filmographies ★ massive: 1,274 oversize pages weigh 4½ pounds But it's more than a superb reference. Author/director Ephraim Katz makes it a pleasure to read — as addicting as peanuts, once you start browsing.



Publisher's price \$29.95

Yours for only **\$2.87** when you join the Movie/Entertainment Book Club and agree to the terms in the coupon. **YOU SAVE \$27.08!**

MONEYBACK GUARANTEE



MOVIE/ENTERTAINMENT BOOK CLUB

15 Oakland Avenue • Harrison, NY 10528

I enclose \$2.87. Please send me the \$29.95 *Film Encyclopedia*, postpaid and at no additional charge. At the same time, please accept my membership in the Movie/Entertainment Book Club. I agree to buy 4 books over the next 2 years at regular Club prices, plus shipping and handling. I may resign after buying and paying for 4 books at regular Club prices. I will be offered at least 200 books on movies and entertainment, usually at 20-33% discounts plus shipping and handling. For every book I buy at the regular Club price, I receive one or more **FREE Bonus Book Certificates** which entitle me to buy many books at far below regular Club price, usually at 60-80% discounts. I'll

be offered a new Club Selection plus Alternates every 4 weeks (13 times a year) in the Club bulletin, **PREVIEWS**. If I want the Selection, I will do nothing and it will come automatically. If I want an Alternate or no book at all, I'll notify you by returning the form always provided by the deadline date specified. If I should ever receive a Selection without having had 10 days to decide if I want it, I may return it at Club expense and receive full credit. **PREVIEWS** also includes news about my fellow members and their hobbies. I am welcome to send in similar items about myself and my interests. **PREVIEWS** will publish every such item it deems suitable, **FREE**.

TZD-4

Name (please print) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Rod Serling's
THE TWILIGHT ZONE
Magazine

PRESENTS A SPECIAL ISSUE ON

**STEPHEN
KING**

featuring

THE FIFTH QUARTER

a lost tale by the master of the macabre

KING'S "OVERDRIVE"

an exclusive preview

of the first movie King has ever directed

THE KING SPEAKS

an interview with the master

COLLECTING KING

Douglas E. Winter on King collectibles

**ON SALE NOW
WHERE BOOKS AND MAGAZINES
ARE SOLD**

**THIS SCAN IS
COURTESY OF THE
LENNY SILVER
COLLECTION**